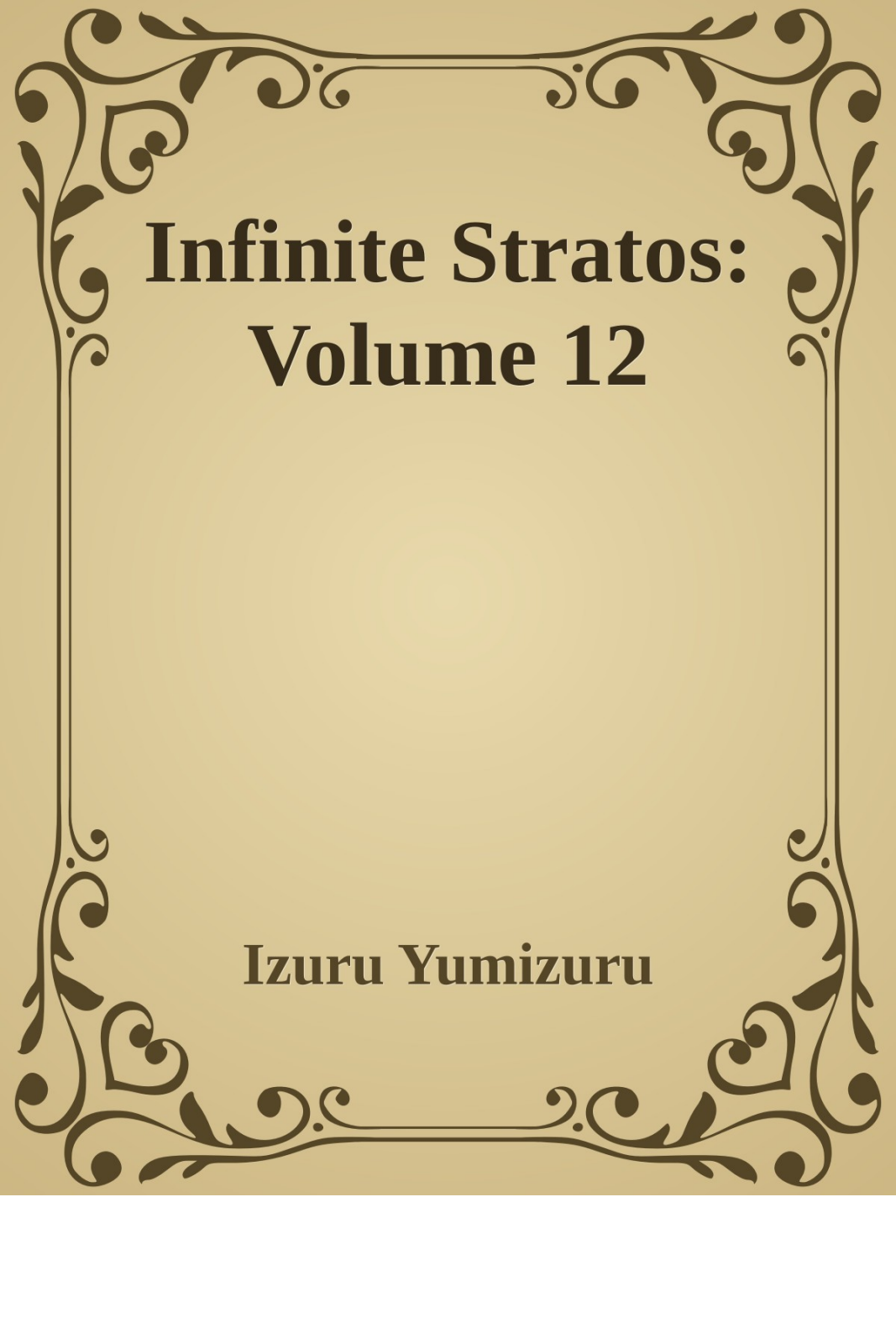


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a dark brown color, framing the entire page.

Infinite Stratos: Volume 12

Izuru Yumizuru

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Iris

"I... I want to sleep together..."



Ichika: "So what if that's true?!"

Ichika raised his hand to block the incoming blow.

An IS created by Thaline for use by Luxembourg's seventh princess. As a fourth-generation IS, its capabilities are among the most advanced in the world. Its weaponry layout in particular, including the Gravton Cluster A2/AD bombardment system, is one of the most powerful even alongside modern IS, while its Gravity Shield energy forcefield projects a barrier against hazards to its royal pilot from all angles. The angelic wings can also wrap around its pilot for even more protection. This strength in both offense and defense makes it one of the most versatile IS in existence.

Reporting name:	Equipment:
Dan-7-0ugo	"Gravity Staccato," Scepter
Model: Luxy-7	Armor:
Generation: Fourth	Layered Variable-Output Gravity Film
Country: Luxembourg	Features:
Classification:	"Gravton Cluster," A2/AD bombardment system
Bombardment Platform	Gravity Shield
	Standby Mode: Royal Tiara

When Ichika was in mortal danger, Bakushiki's Third Shift form made the integration of the O.V.E.R.S. pack means an end to energy worries. But the inner workings of the Ouri are a mystery even to IS Academy's engineers. Its back-mounted energy wing functions on the same energy-absorbing principles as Roraku Byakuya, making it a valuable tool both offensively and defensively. Its true One-Off Ability, Yuunagi Touya, has the potential to reform any other IS, making it a sort of 'king of IS.' What other mysteries the Ouri holds have yet to be revealed.

Reporting name:	Equipment:
Bakushiki Dai-3 Keitai Ouri	"Yashiro Nagata" ("Snowflake Mk-II"), Melee Blade
Model: XX-01	Armor:
Generation: Third	Nano-Bonded Layered Hybrid Honeycomb Armor
"Some subsystems incorporate fourth-gen technology."	(With Bio-Synchronization Function)
Country: Japan	Features:
Classification:	"Roraku Byakuya" ("Twilight Downfall"),
Short-Range Melee IS	Barrier-Nullifying Attack
"Also equipped with long-ranged weaponry."	"Kasumigawara" ("Ride of Mist"), Energy-Nullifying Shield
	"Yuunagi Touya" ("Torchlit Evening Calm"),
	IS Reforming Ability
	Standby Mode: Gauntlet

Iris Twilight Luxembourg Right



Left Djibril Emulail





Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS. Personal IS: Byakushiki



Shinonono Houki

Ichika's childhood friend.
Personal IS: Akatsubaki



Cecilia Alcott

The British National Cadet.
Personal IS: Blue Tears



Huang Lingyin

The Chinese National Cadet.
Personal IS: Shenlong



Charlotte Dunois

The French National Cadet.

Personal IS: Rafale Revive Custom II



Laura Bodewig

The German National Cadet.

Personal IS: Schwarzer Regen



Tatenashi Sarashiki

IS Academy Student Council President.

Personal IS: Mysterious Lady



Kanzashi Sarashiki

Japanese National Cadet.

Personal IS: Uchigane Nishiki

Chapter N *Lingering Passion*

Chapter I *The Princess That Shouted ‘Me, Me, Me!’*

Chapter II *Beautiful Duelists*

Chapter III *Crimson Smoke, Snow, Moon, Flowers*

Chapter IV *Respite in a Doomed World*



Chapter N: Lingering Passion

“Cecilia...”

“Ahh... Ichika...”

A secret bedchamber in Cecilia’s mansion. Concealed by the luxurious drapery of a canopy bed, two shadows intertwined.

“You’re so beautiful...” Ichika’s voice was husky with passion, in a way that drove Cecilia mad.

“Why, Ichika... You’re so forward tonight...”

Ichika unbuttoned his tuxedo jacket and pressed toward Cecilia. Cecilia, already in sheer lingerie, found her hips straining toward him.

“I’ll never let you go again... My fair lady...”

“I-Ichika— Ahh!” Kisses fell like rain on her neck, as Ichika’s hand drifted lower.

“It’s time, Cecilia...”

“No, wait... I don’t know if I’m ready...” Warning bells rang in Cecilia’s mind, but her instincts took over, and all she could do was sigh.

“These beautiful breasts... These curvy hips... Mine, and mine alone.” As he continued kissing her, his right hand gently caressed her body. Electric jolts of pleasure ran across her with each brush of his fingertips.

“Ahh, wait...”

Slipping his own pants off, Ichika brought his face up to Cecilia’s and looked her in the eye. The warmth of his breath made her skin almost burn in anticipation.

“I can’t wait any longer, Cecilia...”

“Mm! Ahh, Ichika!”

“Cecilia!” Ichika pressed down onto her.

And as he did, Cecilia felt her head bang into something. Bewildered, she opened her eyes to see the world upside down. It was dark, quiet, and there was no sign of Ichika.

“Was... Was that a dream?” Confused, she reflexively flipped on the lights.

“Listen, Cecilia. I don’t care about the bed. At least, I’ve given up on it. But what the hell gave you the idea that you could wake me up at night too?”

IS Academy first-year dorms. Cecilia’s room. And an extremely irked roommate, one Kisaragi Kisara. With Cecilia’s bed taking up

most of the floor space, she'd already had to fall back on her training from the Mountaineering club and take up sleeping in a sleeping bag. Much to her displeasure.

"Er, Kisara?"

"Don't 'Er, Kisara' me!" A flying pillow caught Cecilia in the face. "Knock it off with the weird dreams, and get some rest. Jeez."

"Ah, yeah... Sorry about that."

Kisara tapped the button on her remote control for the lights and snuggled down in her sleeping bag.

That must have been a dream... But it was so vivid... As Cecilia remembered the feel of his lips trailing down her neck, Her face grew red. *I wish I could have seen just a little bit more...* Wishing a dream like that had gone on was just another sign of how fond Cecilia had grown of Ichika.

"Oh, and Cecilia?"

"What is it?"

"No more wet dreams, okay? I could do without the moaning while I'm trying to sleep."

Gulp. Cecilia's face turned bright red. And so, the night passed—

Chapter I: The Princess That Shouted 'Me, Me, Me!'

"It always sneaks up on me how close New Year's is to Christmas." Winter vacation had begun, and with it, the new year was about to arrive. "Gonna be nice to just have a bowl of soba and relax without the crowd around."

Ichika was relieved to be back home after everything he'd gone through recently. But just when he picked up a tangerine, Chifuyu stepped back into the room after a long bath.

"So much happened this year. Hey, Chifuyu, you feel like some soba?"

"Sounds good."

"I'll get it going, then."

As he stood up to go to the kitchen, though, Chifuyu added something unexpected, "But make extra, okay?"

"Huh? Why?"

"Hold on a sec."

She turned and stepped out into the garden, where a few lazy snowflakes were melting as they landed. Still, though, it was December. More than cold enough for people.

"Come on out, Laura." For once, Chifuyu was calling her by her given name. "I know you're hiding. Come out."

Laura's instinct was to stay down and hope it was just a trick, but realizing her punishment would only be worse if she didn't comply, she rose, her white-and-grey winter camo more visible now against the fence.

"How long have you been there?" Ichika sighed. Her nose was beginning to turn red from the cold, but she was still defiant.

"Since before nightfall."

"What is wrong with you?" He wrapped an arm around her to warm her up, and led her inside. "You know, you could always just knock on the door like a normal person."

"My mission was to protect you and her from the shado— *Achoo!*" Laura couldn't even finish her sentence without sneezing.

"Sit down at the kotatsu," said Ichika, gesturing forward. "I'll get you something warm to drink."

"So this is a kotatsu. An Eden for cats! Symbol of the winter season!" That kind of not-quite-right, not-quite-wrong idea could only

have come from Klarissa, who seemingly had an endless stock of slight misconceptions about Japan.

“Here’s some warm milk.”

“Mm. Thanks.” Everyone knew Laura didn’t drink coffee. Even if she was envious of how mature and hard-boiled Chifuyu and Klarissa looked ordering it black. Even if she tried doing so herself at the dining hall, and kept leaving it untouched on her tray. “Phew! That’s hot!”

Laura, never really a fan of hot drinks, sucked her tongue back into her mouth, waiting a few moments before timidly lapping it up like a cat. Leader of the elite Schwarzer Hasen at home in Germany or no, in Japan she was thoroughly domesticated.

“Three bowls of soba coming right up, then. Laura, why don’t you chat with Chifuyu while you wait?”

“Oh, sure.” Even with the prompt, Laura was nervous. Her previous awestruck respect was bad enough, but tinges of an imagined future conversation with her sister-in-law made it even worse. But who could really blame her?

“Laura,” Chifuyu called out, breaking Laura from her daydreaming.

“Yes, Lehrerin!”

“We’re not on base or at school. You can call me by name.”

“Understood, Chiffy!”

“All right, that’s taking it a bit *too* far.” A quick karate chop reinforced the point. “Anyway. Want a tangerine?”

“Y-Yes, Chifuyu.” Laura cradled the fruit in her hand as if it were priceless. “A tangerine... From mein Lehrerin... I can’t eat this, I need to save it forever...”

Her mumble to herself was apparently loud enough for Chifuyu to overhear.

“No. Eat it... What *has* gotten into you, anyway?”

“Err. What do you mean?”

“It’s obvious. You’ve been acting funny lately.”

“Acting funny?! Who, me?”

“Yeah. *Especially* now.” Chifuyu shrugged. Somehow, in the warmth of the kotatsu, she seemed almost impossibly relaxed compared to her normal self. “Anyway, though. This year sure was a mess, wasn’t it? Hey, Ichika. Get me some sake.”

“Of course,” he replied.

“Make sure it’s warm this time, okay?”

“I know, I know. What do you want with it? Pickles?”

“Sure. That’d be great as an appetizer.”

Laura was a little bit jealous of how casually domestic their relationship was. But even a little bit was enough for Chifuyu to pick

up on it.

“What did you always used to say?”

“I... I’d rather not think back to that...” Laura muttered.

“C’mon. I know it’s awkward, but it’s still part of who you are.”

She cringed as Chifuyu laughed it up.

“Here you go, Chifuyu,” said Ichika, coming back into the room.

“Sake and pickles. Try not to drink too much, okay?”

“Fine, fine.” Chifuyu brushed off his concern as she took the plate.

What better to go with warmed sake than Ichika’s homemade napa kraut and a conversation with her student Laura? “Mmm, this stuff’s great.”

She seemed in high spirits as she took a swig of the sake. None of the stress which had weighed on her during the Excalibur incident was visible now.

“So, Laura. How are things going with Ichika? Getting anywhere?”

“Well...” Laura clammed up, making the answer obvious.

“You’ve got to step it up, Laura. A woman needs to know when to go on the attack. Don’t worry about winning the battles. Win the war.”

“I... I see.”

Chifuyu continued to loosen up as the line of liquid visible through the sake bottle sunk lower and lower and the plate of kraut disappeared into her mouth.

“The soba’s almost done, Chifuyu. Don’t fill yourself up before that.”

“I’ll be fine. Just keep the sake coming.” Ichika rolled his eyes as he brought out another two decanters. It didn’t take long for a satisfied Chifuyu to polish them off.

“Y’know, Laura. When you turn twenty we really need to go out drinking sometime.”

“R-Really? Are you sure, Chifuyu?”

“Ahahahaha! Think of it as something to look forward to. I know I am.”

Thinking about the future only put Laura on edge. Naturally, perhaps, for someone who normally focused on the past. The unknown unsettled her. But Chifuyu was kind enough to dispel those fears with her own earnest enthusiasm. It was enough to make even her imagine the days to come.

“All right, soba’s done.” Ichika came to the kotatsu, carrying a tray with three bowls and a delicious-looking plate of fried seafood. “I made fried squid and shrimp too. Laura, you eat squid, right?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, I’m fine with it.” Her wavering eyes were more honest than her words. It didn’t seem like Europeans were very used to eating squid. Ichika remembered her remarking that she’d first

eaten it in Japan.

"It's chopped up nice and fine, so it shouldn't be too chewy. Get it while it's hot!"

"...Understood." Laura gingerly took the bowl of soba. But as her eyes caught sight of the rich golden broth, her mouth began to water. "Wow! This looks great!"

Laura's own fantasies of her future life in Japan as Mrs. Orimura had taken her into a wholehearted interest in the country's everyday life, and especially its street food; she'd had plenty of soba by now, and knew a good bowl when she saw one. Knowing the broth was Ichika's own homemade recipe only made it even more appealing.

"C'mon, Ichika. You sit down too." Less a suggestion from Chifuyu, more an order. After bringing the empty sake decanters away from the table, Ichika settled down at the kotatsu himself. "Let's eat, then."

"Yes, let's eat." Chifuyu, Laura, and Ichika each fell silent for a moment. Chifuyu had drilled into them the importance of being grateful for their meals.

"Mmmm! This is delicious!" Laura spoke with her mouth still full.

"She's right. Ichika, you've gotten a lot better at cooking."

As the meal stretched on, they heard the chimes of distant bells.

"That's it, Chifuyu."

"Mm."

"Happy new year!"

Chifuyu and Ichika bowed their heads, Laura following along after a moment. And thus, a new year dawned at IS Academy.



"Wait, what?! You stayed over at Ichika's?!" Charl, who had been waiting at Shinonono Shrine in a kimono with her hair done up, sounded shocked.

"Yes. It was truly an evening to remember."

"No fair, Laura! I don't think you should try to get out ahead of us like that."

Charlotte puffed her cheeks out in frustration, then began to plan how she'd stun Ichika when he arrived as she waited. *I need to be a little more proactive myself. Yeah, that's it.* And spending a Japanese holiday with Ichika, just her and Laura, was a good chance to be last but not least. Especially with all the other competition out of the way. No one could deny that she looked absolutely adorable. Cecilia had stayed behind in England to take care of some business, Ling had gone home to China. And Tatenashi and Kanzashi were celebrating at their own place.

"Oh, there you are." As she clenched her hands in tension, Ichika

arrived. Unlike her and Laura, he was in his usual non-school-day clothes. Charl was more than a little relieved, though, to see he was wearing the scarf she'd given him.

"Wow, you look great in a kimono! Did Houki help you put it on?"

"Yeah. She's amazing, it took no time at all."

"And what about me? It looks perfect on me, doesn't it?" Laura was as bold in showing off her kimono as Charlotte was shy. Both of them, though, were absolutely gorgeous, enough to catch second and third glances from passersby.

"Wow, is that Charlotte from IS Academy?"

"That must be Laura with her, then. Man, they look even better than the photos."

Ichika, meanwhile, ignored the crowds as he lined them up in his camera's viewfinder. "Guess I should get our first pictures of the year."

"I hope they come out good."

"It's nice to be in the habit of having something to remember days like this by."

The first shot was the girls together, then each of them alone. Next, they passed around the camera so each could get a shot with Ichika.

I'm so glad I bothered to come to this. I guess the early bird really does get the worm. Charlotte was already satisfied with how the day had gone, but Laura wanted more.

"We should probably go make our wishes now. Klarissa said I should wish for safe childbirth."

"Why does she always say that kind of thing..." Ichika was nonplussed, and Charlotte was blushing.

"...Safe childbirth?"

"Yes. Good health is important."

"Well, yeah, but... Seriously, c'mon, Laura." Charlotte, red-faced, punched Laura in the back, much to her confusion.



Shinonono Shrine's clergy and lay ministers milled around the grounds, exchanging their holiday greetings. As they did, Ichika spotted Houki in the crowd and waved to her, trying to get her attention.

"Ah..." She shyly waved back, trying not to make eye contact. Just seeing his face made her feel embarrassed. *He'll probably be watching when I perform the kagura dance ritual...*

The kagura, or the offering dance, was thought to bring luck in the coming year. Normally, Ichika watching as she performed such an important ritual would make her happy, *Calm down, Houki... You'll be*

fine, you can do this. He'd said she was beautiful after last summer's performance. And she had even more practice under her belt now. She was sure to impress him even more.

With her heart rising, she stepped forward and began to dance. Her steps were precise, graceful, yet packed with passion. It was perfect.

As she finished, Ichika rushed over to her. "You were great, Houki! Wasn't she, Charl?"

"Yeah! That was beautiful!"

"T-Thanks."

Praise or no, her heart ached even more. Ichika and Charlotte had been holding hands. It was probably just to make sure they didn't get split up in the crowd, but still. *It's nice that he liked it... But...* Emptiness welling up in her chest, she retreated to the vestry, her eyes gleaming red.



"Hey, why don't we pull a fortune?" Ichika asked the two.

"Fortunes, huh. Letting the gods of Japan judge my fate..."

"Laura, you should really be a bit less credulous about what Klarissa tells you."

As they chatted, Houki appeared, dressed in a kimono at her aunt's insistence.

"Oh, Houki! Great, I didn't know if you'd be wearing one too!" A smile spread across Ichika's face, and Houki's heart fluttered in response.

"I guess. I didn't really care either way, but my aunt thought it was important."

"Really, it was the right idea. Can I get your picture?"

"Hmm? Oh, sure." She was a little surprised at how enthusiastic he was.

"All right, just Houki for the first one."

Snap went the shutter. Twice more, too, once for all three girls together and once for Houki and Ichika.

"....."

"What's wrong, Houki? If you don't get closer to him I can't fit you both in the frame."

"Mm..." Houki's embarrassment came to the forefront during their picture together. Whatever her other duties today were, she was still a girl. Ichika, instead, took the lead, and as he wrapped an arm around her Charl pressed the shutter release.

"There we go... Houki?"

"Er, ah... Oh, nothing..." She hid her face, not wanting anyone to see her blush, as Ichika took her hand and led her to where fortunes

were being told.

"All right, no putting yours back and going for something better. Hear me, Laura?"

"W-Where on Earth did you get that idea from?"

"By you suddenly not being able to look me in the eye." The young part-time miko watched her like a hawk. Ichika was less flanked by beautiful women, more completely encircled by them. And being the elite of IS Academy, they were as famous in their own right as they were eye-catching.

"Look at the harem Orimura Ichika's got."

"Ssh! They'll hear you."

"I can't believe he's just leading them all on like that."

"What a pig."

Ichika sighed, "You know I can hear you, right?"

Anyway, though, it was time for fortunes. Ichika reached straight for his. Chifuyu had taught him to be decisive.

"Ooh, 'Great Luck'! What about you, Charl?"

"'Good Luck'. Sounds pretty dull. Laura?" she replied.

"'Some Luck'. Is that better or worse than just 'A Little Luck'?"

Ichika and Charlotte shrugged.

"Guess I should pull another one, then."

"C'mon, Laura! You're not supposed to do that!" Charlotte scrambled to keep her from pulling not just one more, but a whole bundle.

"How about you, Houki?"

"M-Me?" Houki slid her fortune up her sleeve. "I got 'A Little Luck'."

"Huh. Anyway, now you're supposed to tie them on a tree."

They wandered off toward the tree. But Houki's expression was clouded. Her fortune, reading 'Big Trouble,' hung in her hand like a lead weight.



The second day of the new year. Chifuyu and Ichika were, again, relaxing in their living room.

"Mmmm. Last year was a *mess*. I hope we can just relax now."

"I hear you, Chifuyu. Oh, hey, how many mochi balls do you want?"

"Two's fine." She was watching the international news.

"'Luxembourg princess arrives in Japan', huh."

For just a moment, her eyes hardened. There were few other people in the world who realized the significance of that—and Tabane was one of them.

Luxembourg, a small principality in Europe. A country nestled

atop a sprawling cave system. The cave system was the only source of time crystals, the raw material for IS cores. *She must be pulling strings to get an IS force into the country, completely above board. But why now?* The more she thought about it, the more suspicious it seemed. *What's she up to?*

As she mulled it over, Ichika brought her a bowl of rice cake soup. "Here you go."

"Ooh." She took a deep breath of its aroma, savoring the traditional holiday meal, before stretching out one of the mochi balls and taking a bite. "This is good."

"Thanks."

"You should have some too."

"Sure. Lemme clean up the kitchen first."

He quickly washed up, but just as he was about to start cooking his own bowl, the doorbell rang.

"I wonder who that is? It's strange to have unannounced visitors so soon after the holidays," Chifuyu voiced her thoughts aloud.

"I'll get it." Hanging up his apron, Ichika went to open the front door, and there he found—

"Happy new year, Ichika!"

"I'm sure you're *thrilled* to see me so soon."

Cecilia and Ling, in kimono. Ichika's jaw dropped at the sight.

"Who helped you two put those on? They're perfect."

"The lady at the store did."

"Oh, I just put mine on myself."

That's a total lie, Cecilia's glare screamed. And she was right. Ling hadn't just had it put on where she bought it, they'd done her hair too. Ichika was a bit taken aback by their new hairstyles.

"I should get a picture of this." He was really getting into the idea of a holiday photo album. "Can you line up together for me?"

Cecilia shot a quick glance at Ling.

You know what this means, right.

Of course. He's not even thinking about getting photos with us.

Very well, then. Time for plan B.

Got it. Here I go!

This took barely a second and a half. What a team; such good friends.

"Actually, why don't I get a picture with you, Ichika? Ling, can you do the honors?"

"Hey, wait, no matter how you look at it I should be first! Cecilia, if you'd be so kind?"

Lightning flew between them. This took barely half a second. What fickle friends.

"Ling! I should be first!"

“Cecilia! I should be first!”

The two girls growled at each other, and almost came to blows before a hanetsuki paddle was thrust between them.

“It’s an ancient tradition that disagreements between women be settled through sport. So now! For New Year’s! That’s how you’re going to solve it!” Chifuyu had appeared from the kitchen, a bottle of sake in her other hand.

“Well, that certainly makes sense.”

“You’re gonna have to walk home covered in ink!”

Each girl gripped her paddle, eager for the chance to prove her own prowess.

“You do realize I’m quite familiar with this game?”

“Pssh! They used to call me the Paddle Fairy! I don’t care how good you are, there’s no way you can compare!”

And thus, the match began. At first, Cecilia played almost like it was a tennis match, but as time went on she began to pick up more and more of Ling’s tricks.

“No fair, Cecilia!”

“All’s fair in love and war. And— There!”

“Ugh, dammit!”

As they talked trash back and forth, Ichika managed to snap a picture of them enjoying themselves.



“I certainly seem to have worked up quite a sweat.” Cecilia fanned her cheek with a palm.

Meanwhile, Ling was scrubbing ink off her face with a towel proffered by Ichika. “Phew, I’m all worn out. We’ll have to finish this later.”

Ichika appeared with two more bowls of soup and called out to them, “Did somebody say ‘leftovers’?”

He couldn’t help himself from smirking a little as he unleashed his latest wordplay.

“Yes, let’s eat.” But neither of the girls was taking the bait.

“Get it? Finish it later? Leftovers?” Once Ichika committed to a joke, he was damn well going to see it through, even if it meant wringing every ounce of humor out of it.

“Mm! This is tasty. You picked some good ingredients.” Ling poked at the shrimp and seitan, spinach and fish cake floating in her bowl as she chewed.

“And the broth is delicious too,” Cecilia spoke quietly as she sipped. She’d gotten a lot more confident about her own cooking lately as well.

“How about some amazake, too? I can go get a bottle,” Ichika

suggested as he ate.

"Ichika. Aren't we a bit young for that?" Ling quickly shot back.

"It's okay. It's not really alcoholic. Right, Ichika?"

Ichika nodded. Cecilia was a bit jealous about the two of them knowing something she didn't, but still nodded along.

"It's more like a sweet soup. Hold on, I'll go get some." Quickly draining his bowl, he headed back to the kitchen.

As she watched him put on his apron, Cecilia sighed, dreaming of a future where she saw that every night. "Wouldn't that be nice."

"Really? Guess I'm just used to it by now."

"Oh my, Ling. How depressing. I'll simply have to enjoy the sight enough for both of us!" She smiled serenely as she watched Ichika work. Noticing her gaze, he waved, sending a blush across her face.

"Grr..." It was Ling's turn to be displeased with the lack of attention, and she immediately stared at Ichika. Who completely failed to notice. "Gah! Dammit, Ichika!"

"Wait, what?!"

And thus passed January 2nd.



January 3rd.

"I kinda feel like shiruko tonight. How about you, Chifuyu?"

"Mm? I... I shink I'mma..." Chifuyu had been ensconced at the kotatsu since early in the day, the sake flowing like water. "I'mma go sleep now."

A sudden thunk as she hit the floor, followed by steady breathing. Sighing, Ichika spread a blanket over her.

"Anyway, about that shiruko." As he cooked a pair of mochi balls, the ding-dong of the doorbell announced another day of guests. "Be right there!"

Stepping into the foyer, he was greeted by the Sarashiki sisters—Tatenashi, or Katana to use her real name, and Kanzashi—in flashy, fancy kimono. "Oh, wow! You two decided to wear kimono too?" Ichika said, taken slightly aback.

"Well, of course. I *am* Japanese. Even if I'm Russian on paper." Tatenashi had, of course, chosen to become a Russian pilot.

"Happy new year, Ichika..." Kanzashi primly bowed her head as Tatenashi snapped open a fan reading 'season's greetings.'

"Anyway, let me just get a picture, and then come in, spend some time!"

"Thanks. We both have the whole day free."

"Mmm... Here's a present, Ichika."

He tried his hardest to turn it down—after all, only little kids get new year's presents—but there was no way he could stand up against

the stereo assault of Tatenashi and Kanzashi.

“All right, that’s sorted. Come on in! Or, uh, actually, can you give me a minute?”

As Ichika rushed back to the living room, Tatenashi poked Kanzashi. “Let’s sneak on in after him.”

“Really? We probably shouldn’t...”

“C’mon, it’ll be fun.” With a deliberately-too-quiet-to-hear ‘I’m coming in,’ Tatenashi stepped further into the Orimuras’, Kanzashi resignedly following.

“C’mon, Chifuyu, you have to get up. Go sleep upstairs or something.”

“Mmmm... Nawwww, I wanna shleep under the kotatshu...” Chifuyu mumbled before rolling over.

“We have guests.”

“Tell ’em to come back later.”

“I can’t just— Ah.”

By the time Ichika noticed her, Tatenashi already had an incriminating picture of Chifuyu on her phone.

“Looks like it was a good idea to drop by~♪”

“Mmmph...” Chifuyu slid herself as far under the kotatsu as she could fit.

Giving up on getting her to move, Ichika led the Sarashikis to the table set up between the living room and kitchen.

“Did you two have lunch yet? I’m making shiruko.”

“That sounds great! Doesn’t it, Kanzashi?”

“Yeah. I could go for some mochi...”

“Got it!” Ichika answered happily as he began cooking enough for three. The batch from before would make dinner for Chifuyu.

“Wow, this is great!”

“Yeah. I like it...”

It was a refreshing change from the extravagant feasts the Sarashikis had been holding.

“Phew. It feels great to relax.”

“Mmm... It sure does.”

As they chewed their mochi, Ichika saw a golden chance to snap a photo. “Gotcha!”

“Jeez. Don’t you have any manners, Ichika?”

“Yeah, c’mon...”

“Aww, why not?” Ichika winked, and the two found themselves blushing unexpectedly.

“Jeez, fine.”

“You’re such a tease lately...”

With their bowls nearly empty, conversation turned to how to spend the afternoon.

“Karuta’s probably a bad idea. What do you two feel like?” Ichika tried to steer the conversation away from things that could wake Chifuyu up.

“How about lucky laugh? We could all use some more luck, and some more laughs.”

“Yeah... It’s perfect for the new year.”

As Ichika began to nod in agreement, Tatenashi produced a set from her purse. “What a coincidence, I came prepared.”

“Tatenashi!” Ichika and Kanzashi both sighed in exasperation. It seemed like it would be another year of the student council president always being a step ahead.

“Why don’t you go first, Kanzashi? I’ll do your blindfold.”

“Well, I’ll try...” She clenched her hands.

“And Ichika, this is a perfect chance for you to cop a feel.”

“What?!”

“...I may have a blindfold on, but I can still hear you.”

Anyway, the game began.

“Hmm...” Kanzashi wrapped her fingers around the face parts, trying to gauge them by feel. *I think these are the lips. They should go... Around here?* Slowly but surely, Kanzashi began to assemble the face.

Ugh, this is so boooooooring. Having to sit and watch quietly while absolutely nothing went wrong was like torture for Tatenashi. *Maybe I should spice it up.*

Kanzashi was nearing completion of the face, completely oblivious to what was about to befall her. And then, suddenly, a hand cupped her breast.

“Eek?!”

Did... Did Ichika really just— He... He’s feeling me up... She could feel the hand relentlessly creep forward. And smell boozy breath...

“Bwahaha. Nice to see a student of mine making progress.” It was Chifuyu.

“That’s not nice! C’mon, Chifuyu, go up to your room!” For once, Ichika knocked some sense into her.

“Jeez, you’re such a killjoy.” Her pride wounded, Chifuyu disappeared up the stairs. And as the storm passed, Kanzashi sat quietly, still a bit shocked.

“Sorry. She messed up your kimono, too. Ugh.” Ichika stood, reaching out his hand, only to be batted away by Tatenashi in a playful mood.

“And the only way to wrap it up tight is to start all the way from the beginning!” She pulled open her sister’s kimono, exposing her cleavage.

“Eeeeeek!”

Unfortunately for Ichika, he was the one who ate the reflexive

punch.

“Why me?!”

And thus passed January 3rd.





“In any case, I plan on pushing you to the fullest of your potential this year. Don’t let me down.”

In classroom 1-A at IS Academy, a suit-clad Chifuyu had just finished laying out her plan for the third trimester. Not a shred of her recent drunken debauchery was left.

“And speaking of which, we’ll be having a very special exchange student: the seventh princess of Luxembourg.”

The class gasped in surprise.

“Ehh?! A princess, at IS Academy?”

“I’ve never actually seen her, even on TV...”

“But I’m sure she’ll be amazing!”

Everyone was excited. Except for Ichika, who had a very bad feeling about what was coming.

“Quiet down!” Chifuyu demanded. “She’s still only fourteen. I expect you all to be on your best behavior. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Her stern tone of voice was enough to put a little bit of fear in the girls as well.

“Then, Your Royal Highness. If you may.”

The classroom door slid open and a red carpet rolled forth. Then came a retinue of maids in smartly-cut pantsuits surrounding a young girl. This was Her Royal Highness, and national cadet, Iris Twilight de Luxembourg.



“Thank you for your trouble, Orimura Chifuyu.”

“But of course.”

She was even shorter than Ling, even flatter than Ling, with a baby face which made her look even younger than she was, but wrapped in an extravagant dress. Her poise and air were every inch as regal as a queen’s, but her cheeky grin gave Ichika the impression that she’d be even more of a handful than Ling was.

This is not good. Not good at all!

For just a moment, their eyes met. He tried to tear his away, but it was too late.

“You there!” Her finger pointed straight toward him. “Orimura Ichika, am I correct?”

“Err... Yes?”

“Ufufu. *You* shall be my attendant. Bask in the glory.” Her lips wrapped back in a self-satisfied smirk.

“Ugh, I just knew this was going to happen.” Ichika slumped back in his chair.

“Wait, what’s going on here?!” The rest of the cadets seemed just as displeased with how things were going as he did.

“You heard Her Royal Highness. I expect you to be a perfect gentleman.”

The message was clear. This was *his* problem. And thus began a new trimester sure to be even messier than the last.



“Ugh, a butler outfit? *Again?!*” I couldn’t imagine being any more embarrassed. And it wasn’t even temporary like last time. The royal command was that, if I was wearing *anything*, it had better be that or pajamas. “I don’t care if she really is a princess, this is...”

A glare from one of the suit-clad maids cut me off before he could even finish with ‘going too far.’

“It is as Her Royal Highness commands.”

“Uh, okay...”

Their leader, a woman with a standoffish attitude accentuated by her low-bridged round glasses, had an especial talent for throwing daggers with her eyes that could cut through steel.

“Er, Florence? Can I at least go to class now?”

“No objections!” She was standoffish, or more just completely unapproachable. “The Imperial Knight will be arriving in Japan today. I expect you to greet her.”

“O-Okay.” And right now, those metaphorical daggers had me metaphorically pinned to the wall. *First princesses, now knights? This is getting more and more absurd. What the hell is going on with my life? Ahh,*

hell, who am I kidding? Who else would even be able to figure this out?

“Garde à vous!”

Backs stiffened all around me as a clear, intense voice rang out like a bell. Even I couldn’t help but straighten up in response. That was how intense her voice was. A bright flash filled my vision, like lightning I heard rather than saw. I wasn’t sure which way I’d look if I heard her in one ear and a lion’s roar in the other.

“Her Royal Highness desires a promenade. Of course, the companionship of one of you will be necessary.” Her hair was long and straight, and in lieu of the others’ suits she wore a brigandine and an épée at her hip as if she’d stepped straight off the set of a period drama. “Very well. Orimura Ichika!”

“Yes, ma’am!” She had an ice-cold beauty about her as she pointed at me.

“She’s chosen you. I expect you to be on your best behavior.”

“Understood! But, er, who are you?”

“Imperial Knight Djibril Emmuler. Any other questions?”

“No, ma’am!” She was taller than I was, and I stretched out as much as I could as I answered. And as I did, she whispered in my ear.

“You understand what will happen if any misfortune befalls the princess, correct?”

“Y-Yes! I will protect her with my life!”

“Exactly what I wanted to hear. Dismissed!”

We split off. The maids and the Knight going one way while I went the other. Still wondering what the hell was going on, I made my way to the special guest room in the dorms.



As he did, the usual crew watched from behind.

“They’re working him like a slave.”

“Indeed! I’m jealous, er, I mean, that’s unforgivable!”

“He’s just a magnet for trouble.”

“Maybe he has a talent for it?”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d call that a talent.”

“More a curse...”

None of them were quite satisfied that they’d gotten the last word in that exchange.

“Looks like we have to tail him.” At least, that was Ling’s idea. A spy thriller off school grounds was appealing to them all, though.

“Let’s try not to be spotted.”

“Yeah.”

Their whispers were no less enthusiastic for their muted volume. No one suspected that disaster was about to strike.



“Jeez...” Keeping up with Princess Iris was absolutely exhausting for Ichika. Regal airs or no, she was kind of a selfish little brat.

“*Ichika! I want something to read. Go buy me some manga.*”

“*Ichika, I want ice cream. Go buy me some.*”

“*Ichika, rub my shoulders.*”

“*Ichika.*”

“*Ichika!*”

“*I-chi-ka!*”

He could hear it echoing in his head even when she wasn't with him, and the echoes were beginning to give him a migraine.

“What will it be today?” he sighed as he stepped back into the room and Iris sat up in bed.

“There you are, Ichika. My legs are tired. Massage them.”

“Very well.”

She sidled over in bed, casually sliding her legs off the side. They were lithe like a girl's, with smooth, smooth skin. Not really thinking, he began the massage.

“.....”

“What's wrong? You're so quiet today.”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking, you have pretty legs.”

For Ichika, it was just a casual observation, but Iris's face turned bright red.

“H-How rude! Of course they are! Hmph!” As if it just now occurred to her that he was a guy, Iris tugged her legs back and tucked them under herself.

Ichika didn't really get why she'd do so.

“Jeez, and I was just complimenting you...” he shrugged.

“Rude and lewd!” He couldn't help but laugh at how it reminded him of Houki. But if anything, it frustrated Iris even more.

“What are you laughing about?! How insolent! Off with your head!”

“Please, no.”

This exchange had become a refrain between the two of them, evidence of how they'd grown to know each other over the past week.

“Anyway, Ichika. I want some clothes.”

“But you already have plenty of dresses?”

“Not like that! I mean, something like... Like... Find me this!”

Looking at the fashion magazine spread open on her bed which she pointed to, Ichika realized what she meant.

“So something like a normal girl would wear?” he questioned.

“Y-Yes! I need to know how the *hoi polloi* live! It is my duty as a ruler!” She shook with tension as she tried, and mostly failed, to puff

out what passed for a chest.

“And? What will you wear when we go out?”

“W-Well, I’ve been thinking—and while I’m sure it will be impossible to hide my regal aura—but an IS Academy uniform should make me blend in well enough.”

“Understood.”

She had prepared in advance for this eventuality, and already arranged for an IS Academy uniform. Apparently, she really did want to go shopping.

“Anyway, I’ll wait in the hall while you change.”

As he began to step out, words he’d never expected stopped him.

“No. I’d like your assistance. And I’m sure you wouldn’t mind.”

“Are you sure?!” Even if she was flat as a board, it would be awkward seeing her in her underwear. But shooting her down would make things even more awkward between them, so he went along as if it were completely natural. “Very well. I’ll assist you.”

“Hmph.”

“.....?”

Iris, apparently displeased with that answer, puffed her cheeks out. “Enough! I can change myself!”

“Huh? Very well. Understood.”

“Get out of here, you idiot!” She shoved Ichika out into the hall, where all he could do was be relieved that he’d survived that ordeal.



“What do you think?”

“Smells fishy to me.”

“Very fishy.”

“Yeah, that’s fishy.”

“Fresh-caught.”

“Is it really fishy... if it’s just a sure thing?”

Houki, Cecilia, Ling, Charlotte, Laura, and Kanzashi conferred in the shadows as they watched Ichika’s unceremonious ejection. They’d arrived at the conclusion that the princess was new competition.

“I always knew there was something that set me off about her.”

“Simply unforgivable, using her privilege like that.”

Ling and Cecilia were willing to form a temporary alliance to deal with this new threat. Charlotte and Laura nodded their assent, as well.

“She’s too aggressive for me...” Kanzashi muttered.

“It’s not fair. So... So this is where you meant?” That wasn’t quite what they were expecting to hear from Houki.

“...Houki?” She was alone, off to the side, muttering to herself. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all,” she laughed wanly.

At that moment, the disaster was only just beginning.



“So, what do you think? I look stunning in this uniform, don’t I?” Iris preened for Ichika in her new outfit.

“Not bad at all.” He had to agree, it looked good on her. “I can’t wait to see you in that every day.”

An honest assessment, and one Iris took well.

“Mmhm. It’ll be wonderful, won’t it? And a very good thing for the school.” Even her usual haughtiness was adorable when clad in a school uniform. Ichika couldn’t help but giggle, and Iris’s face turned red as he did. “W-What’s wrong with you? You’re so rude.”

“Sorry. Anyway, I’ll go change into my uniform.”

“Okay. Shall we meet at the gate?”

They split up, Ichika rushing back to his room so as not to keep her waiting.

“Phew, I haven’t worn this in a while.” It was a relief to be back in his normal clothes. Change complete, he ran to the gate.

“You’re late!” As he expected, she was angry. “While I was waiting for you, they kept mistaking me for a common student! Me! Me, of all people!”

Her frustration with being taken for an average first year was obvious. But in a uniform instead of her normal dresses, it was entirely within reason.

“Someone even called me a middle schooler! Me! Me, of all people!” Her anger only helped complete the picture of a normal girl. Put that way, it softened the edges of her habitual pride, and made her seem cute.

I guess she is around the age where it really matters what people think of her. It almost felt to Ichika like he had a new little sister.

“What are you laughing about?! Off with your head!”

“Please, no.” Ichika brought out his bicycle as they squabbled.

“Now, if you could sit behind me.”

“Hmm? Why not take a car?”

“If we took a car, they’d definitely realize who you were, Your Royal Highness.”

“Very well, Ichika,” she nodded in understanding. “Oh, I suppose you can call me by name now.”

“Okay, Iris.”

“D-Don’t just call me by name! I’m not used to it!”

He... Almost understood, and nodded himself then said, “How about Alice, then?”

“A-A-A-Alice?! Me?! Me, of all people?!”

“Now sit down behind me. We’re running out of time, Alice.”

“...Understood.” It seemed like she enjoyed her new name, even if it took a little getting used to. The Princess—or, for now, just Alice—nodded and climbed on behind her. “So this is what the little people call ‘growing up’...”

“Huh? Didn’t hear you.”

“N-Nothing! Let us be off!”

“Okay.” He began to pedal.

There was a chill in the January breeze, but Iris’s face was comfortably warm. She’d finally felt like one of the heroines she always read about.



“Okay, where do I park... Oh, there’s a spot.”

Ichika found a place for his bike at the shopping mall by the station while Iris stared up in awe at the massive building.

“We built castles for war, Japan builds them to sell clothes...”

“No, Alice. It’s not just clothes. They sell plenty of things. They even have restaurants.”

“Oh, I see! Is there one with soba? I’ve always wanted to try that.”

“Of course. A famous one, in fact.”

“I see!” Iris’s eyes sparkled, and a girlish smile crept across her face.

“Anyway, we should look at the clothes.”

“Indeed! Let’s go, Ichika!” As she spun toward the entrance, her foot caught a patch of ice. “Eek!”

“Look out!” Deftly, he caught her before she could fall. As his arms wrapped around her, her face glowed red.

“Y-You’re too close! Let me go, you insolent pig! O-O-Off with your head!”

“Please, no, Allie.”

“W-Wait, that’s going too far! Call me Alice!”

“Okay, Alice.” Ichika lightly set her down.

“Oww!” A jolt of pain welled up from her twisted ankle as she tried to walk. “Ugh, these boots are so difficult to walk in.”

As Iris frowned, Ichika had an idea. “That’s okay, I’ll carry you.”

“W-Wait, what? Ichika, what *are* you doing?!”

“Just leave it to me!” Hoisting her up behind him, he confidently began to stride off.

“I-I-I-Ichika! Stop this! Everyone’s staring at us!”

“It’s because you’re making a scene. Now let’s go.”

All she could do was bury her face in his back as she felt her heart begin to throb.



“Agghhhh! I *will* make him pay for this!”

“Indeed! He’s never even done that for *me*!”

While Ling was stamping her feet and Cecilia was twisting her handkerchief, Charlotte, Laura, and Kanzashi were taking things more seriously.

“So like I was saying. We dress up as employees and try to split them up.”

“No. Ichika’s not so easy to fool anymore. It’s like he had some kind of spell cast on him.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure he’d notice...”

And meanwhile, Houki was off to the side, staring up at the sky.

I’m getting this weird sense of déjà vu...

When? When was it? *Who* was it, then?

I can’t remember...

~~Can’t remember~~

~~Can’t remember anything~~

~~It doesn’t matter~~

I... I’m...

~~I’m here for you”~~

“...Wait, Houki, are you okay?” It was only when Ling called out to her that the red gleam left her eyes.

“What?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’? You’ve been staring off into space this whole time! What’s wrong, anyway? You’ve been acting real funny lately.”

“Not really, I don’t think. This is how I normally am.” Houki clenched her fists.

“Oh? Fine, I guess.” That was enough to make Ling back off. One of her strong points was knowing when she absolutely had to stop pushing.

“They’re leaving that shop!”

Iris was grinning ear-to-ear. It looked like she’d found the outfit she wanted. And judging by how close they were as they left, it looked like Ichika had told her exactly what she wanted to hear.

“We don’t have time for this! We’ve gotta stay on their tail!” Ling grabbed Houki’s hand to drag her along even as her reverie continued, and trailed Ichika and the princess.



“Ooh, so this is the soba I’ve heard so much about!”

Unsurprisingly, Iris had the political skill to look savvy yet still girlish by ordering hers with tempura. Ichika’s order was with chicken. And while they waited for their bowls, they had time to talk. “Anyway, Ichika.”

“Yes?”

“Well, um... Don’t you have any interest in the outside world?”

Ichika, bemused by her sudden uncharacteristic fidgety nervousness, asked, “The world? You mean, like, traveling overseas? I just did that last month.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I had a lot of fun in Europe, I’d like to go back someday.”

“I see! You want to go back, huh?” Her smile gleamed. This was going just as planned. “Then why don’t you come to my country?”

“Huh?”

“I could make you my manservant there.”

“Umm...” Before Ichika could figure out quite how to respond to that, their orders arrived. “Why don’t we talk about it after we eat?”

“Okay.” The crunchy tempura was exactly what Iris was hoping for, but she wasn’t quite sure how to eat the soba.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Iris?”

“Umm... Am I really supposed to slurp this?”

Ichika was impressed. He’d always heard that foreigners couldn’t even imagine eating noodles like that.

“Just eat it however you want to. You don’t have to act like a princess. Today, you’re just Alice.”

“I see!” Relieved, she began to spin the noodles around her chopsticks like they were spaghetti. “This is delicious! The taste is so delicate.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” It really felt to him like he had a little sister. “Anyway, about what we were talking about... Wait, huh?”

The world spun around Ichika. It was only as he and Iris collapsed that they realized something was wrong.

“So, how is everything? If you need somewhere to rest, come right this way!” The waiter dragged their unconscious forms away.

By the time the others noticed something was wrong, they were already gone.



“Ugh... Where am I?” Iris’s consciousness faded in and out. She could tell she’d been drugged.

“Ah, Your Royal Highness! Awake now, I see.” A maid stood before her with a malevolent smile. Iris couldn’t focus enough to remember her name. “You’re a very valuable individual, you know. Especially as a hostage.”

As Iris’s eyes darted around, she saw a row of burly men behind her. “What are you doing with me?”

“Don’t worry,” the maid replied. “This will all be over soon.”

“I see. Then, I’ll grant you a moment to say your prayers. Three seconds should be enough.”

“.....?”

“And that’s time. Come forth! Seventh Princess!” Iris’s hairpin glowed as seven wings wrapped around her into a royal gown—the angelic IS, Seventh Princess. “Any more regrets, you can work through in Hell!”

The seven wings spread as she shifted into attack mode. But even as she did, her vision began to fade.

“What... What is this...” Whatever anesthetic they had dosed her with left her unable to fully open her IS. “Ichika... Ichi... ka...”

The princess called out, not to her Imperial Knight, but to her manservant. To the man she’d come to love. *If... If only Ichika came to save me...* All she could do could hope in vain.

But then, a bolt of white light proved her wrong.

“Alice!”

Ichika pulled the double door open to both sides, his IS Byakushiki already formed around him.

“You’ll pay for this!”

These were the last words she heard as his arm wrapped around her.



Chapter II: Beautiful Duelists

“What a failure! What a disgrace!” Imperial Knight Djibril Emmuler was scolding Ichika harshly. She’d started in as soon as he got back to the dorms. “I should take you back to my country so you can be punished properly!”

Ms. Yamada couldn’t let that pass. “Come on. She’s safe. Orimura was the one to save her. Let’s leave it at that.”

“You’re too easy on him, Maya! You still haven’t learned! Why protect him from having to learn his lesson?!”

Djibril and Maya’s history as rivals only ramped up her anger further... Their rivalry, and their abandoned plans for their future.

“...It’s not too late, Maya. Don’t waste your time here as a glorified babysitter. Come with me. I can personally promise that you’ll be knighted almost immediately.”

“I’ve already told you, Djibril. I love this country. I love this school. I can’t leave.”

“You’re still trying to run away from me, aren’t you?!”

All Maya could do was laugh wryly. “No, it’s just...”

“Don’t make excuses! You know I’ll never be satisfied with that answer!”

The door to the princess’s guest room opened, interrupting them. Iris was awake now, and coming to see what all the noise was.

“Could you quiet down? ...Oh, and Ichika.” Iris was already back to being a princess, and stared at Ichika intently, as befitting her position. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness.”

“Wonderful. That’s what really matters.” Taking a deep breath, she spoke again. “We will invite Orimura Ichika to Luxembourg. There, he will live out his life as my manservant.”

If anything, it sounded more like a marriage proposal.

“Wha?”

“Whaa?”

“Whaaaaaa?”

More astonished than Ichika was Djibril, more astonished than Djibril were the cadets. Pointedly ignoring them, Iris continued as she puffed out her chest, “Let those who object say their piece now, or forever be silent!”

“Of course we object!” Ling said, puffing out her own chest

slightly more successfully.

“Oh? You. What is your name?”

“Huang Lingyin! You’d better remember it!”

“Mhm. Then, Huang Lingyin. Shall we settle this like women?”

Ling replied, just as fired up as Iris was, “Sounds great! Let’s do it!”

Sparks flew between two decidedly low-environmental-impact chests. It was her complete opposite, Djibril, who cut in to cool them down.

“You mustn’t, Your Royal Highness! This is below you!”

“I see it as an excellent opportunity to teach these commoners their place.”

“But— At least let me fight as your champion!” Djibril pleaded.

“No! A royal’s duty is to lead from the front lines!”

Ling knew when she had someone’s attention, and milked it for all it was worth.

“How about both of you, then? I’m fine with that.” They were taking the bait. Ling knew they were exactly the type to fall for it.

“Hmph! Two-on-two it is! I suppose I’ll allow you to choose your own second.”

“Good enough, then! Sounds like fun! I choose... Houki!” Houki blinked in confusion. “C’mon, team up with me.”

“Wh-What?!”

“It’ll be fine! Team Childhood Friends! Two enemies joining forces!” Her logic was... questionable, but her passion was overwhelming.

“Err... Okay.” Houki sighed as she nodded.

The second one was accurate, at least. *If I win, then Ichika might finally...* Might notice her. Yes... She had to win. She *needed* to win.

“Looks like it’s arranged, then. We meet a week from Sunday, in the third arena!”

The gauntlet was thrown down.



“Hey, wait, Rin!” he called out.

“What, Ichika?”

With that settled, everyone was heading back to their rooms.

“You know what you’re up against, right? She’s a princess!”

“Hmph. I don’t care who she is! Do you think I’m gonna lose or something?”

“It’s just, her IS was made by Tabane herself. So...”

“So what? You think I’m gonna lose?”

Houki chimed in, “That’s okay. My Akatsubaki is too.”

“I guess, just...”

“Worry about yourself.”

“Ugh...”

She had a point. If Ling and Houki won, Iris was likely to take it extremely poorly. Ichika was going to need to deal with that.

As he slumped, Ling shot him a smile and said, “Don’t worry, though, we’ve got this!”

“That’s right!”

“Uhhhh...” Smiles on both Ling and Houki’s faces. Ichika was the only one with a frown.

Iris watched from a distance.

“Djibril.”

“What is it, Your Royal Highness?”

“We won’t lose... Will we?”

“Of course not.”

Both were self-assured of their victory. And thus, the week or so until their clash passed...



“I wonder why Shenlong just got a heavy arms upgrade, though.”

Ling was going through the new parts of her preflight checklist. This battle wasn’t just going to be for her own honor; it was also the first combat test of the new Huniang Cannon.

“Haven’t been able to do much besides get it installed, but it should be fine.” As a melee fighter at heart, the addition of a heavy cannon slowing her down wasn’t really her style, but orders were orders. “Just gonna have to try my best.”

Really, even with her new haute couture package, Shenlong’s stats were still in line with her style. All she could do was believe that her IS wouldn’t betray her. And she’d built up that trust.

“No packages for you, Houki?”

Houki was running through her own preflight checks for Akatsubaki.

“Akatsubaki was developed for versatility. It doesn’t need packages,” she shrugged.

“Oh, right. It can evolve to fit any situation, right?”

Houki nodded. “Right. Ahh, there we go, the data on our opponents.”

As soon as she was finished with her checklist, Ling glanced through it, and her jaw dropped.

“What?! They’re *both* fourth gens?! C’mon, gimme a break!”

Ling’s Shenlong may have been one of the newest third-generation rollouts, but it was still going to be hard-pressed against two examples of Shinonono Tabane’s personal handiwork. But IS generations aside, she could still hope that Djibril was going to be carrying some very

heavy royal baggage.

“Ah well, who cares about generations. It’s the pilot’s skill that matters!”

“That’s right!”

Kanzashi, their operator for the match, broke in over comms.

“Seventh Princess is equipped with a new fourth-generation weapon, the Graviton Cluster... And then there’s the Imperial Knight’s electrified sword and shield combo, Éclair. Don’t let your guards down.”

That was enough to dampen Ling and Houki’s moods. And then, there was another pair of eyes watching in the background...

“.....”

Liu Yueyin. Ling’s long-lost father.

“Mr. Liu, you really should have stayed in the hospital...”

“*Cough, cough...* No... I’m fine... This could be my last chance.”

As Ichika looked over the once-strong man’s shriveled, wilted form, he worried. Even though he was a terminal cancer patient, he had rushed to Japan to see his daughter fight one last time.

“I’m sorry to pry, but why did you leave Rin’s— Why did you leave your wife?”

“I... I don’t know how much longer I have. I wanted... I wanted to let them choose their own future.”

“But... But that’s...”

“I don’t expect you to understand. But please... At least listen...”

“.....”

“I wanted to see... I wanted to see my wonderful little girl one last time...”

They had spoken several days before. Ichika had gone into it wanting to give Yueyin a piece of his mind, but seeing how weak he’d become, he didn’t have the heart to.

He may have wanted to give them closure, but... His wife, at least, must have known. Must have gone along with it. Without either of them telling Ling what was really happening. *But that’s just...*

Adult selfishness. At least, that’s what Ichika had to call it. The ties binding family couldn’t be cut easily. He knew that well. Not just in spite of, but because his own closest bond was with Chifuyu rather than his parents.

“It’s starting.”

“Mm...”

Ling and Houki’s battle for Ichika had begun.



“So, handshake before the match?” Ling smirked at Iris.

“Hmph. There’s no need for that,” Iris fired back just as self-

confidently.

“Remember, you promised. If we win, you let Ichika go.” Houki stared down Djibril.

“Of course. A knight doesn’t go back on her word.” Djibril’s eyes gleamed with absolute loyalty to her princess as they bore into Ling and Houki.

“Then, let the battle for Orimura Ichika commence!” Cheers welled up from the crowd at Ms. Yamada’s announcement. There’s nothing teenage girls like better than a good catfight. “And... Begin!”

At the sound of a whistle, four IS shimmered into existence.

“Houki! You take the knight!” Without waiting for an answer, Ling charged toward Iris.

“Hey! Hey, wait! ...Ugh, why me?”

As Ling closed in on Iris, Djibril shot out a bolt of lightning. “I won’t let you get near her!”

Her sword leapt from its sheath, arcing toward Ling, but it was Houki’s turn to cut in with her own blade Amazuki.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself!”

“Ahaha! Thanks, Houki! All right, here goes!”

Clang! The new heavy impact cannon mounted on Ling’s shoulders leveled at Iris, yet she refused to give an inch.

“Only a weakling flinches!”

“Got you!” Her cannon charged, Ling fired. It looked like a direct hit, but when the dust settled, the paint on Iris’s IS wasn’t even scratched.

“Wha?!”

“Looks like you underestimated Seventh Princess.”

As Ling looked closer, she saw a shimmering energy barrier hover over her foe like a veil.

“A gravity shield?! Gimme a break!” Looking down at the analysis Kanzashi had sent, Ling’s eyes widened. The barrier covered Iris completely. There was no weak point.

“And now it’s my turn.” Iris could attack even with her shields up. Raising her right hand, she stared at Ling and Houki. “Take this! Graviton Cluster!”

Her hands flew forth, and a moment later, an unseen *something* collapsed on Ling and Houki.

“Ahh!” The pair were slammed down to the arena floor, then ground into the dirt.

“You’re sure bringing it...”

“So this is what a fourth gen IS is capable of...”

Dodging the lightning shooting from Djibril, they leapt back up, keeping their distance to avoid another Graviton Cluster strike.

“Where do you think you’re running to?” Iris moved forth regally,

her wings spread, firing again when she closed the distance.

“Ugh! She’s better than I expected!” Ling’s mobility had been reduced by her IS’ newly-added reactive shielding. But at least it could serve as a defensive wall against the Graviton Cluster. “This time I’ll hit you at full power!”

Ling’s cannon barrels telescoped out to full scale as they began to charge energy.

“Not so fast!” Djibril carved her way into the line of fire. Houki moved in to block her, only to be hit by lightning as they clashed.

“Houki!” Ling’s concern for her friend was audible in her voice.

Houki bravely forced a smile and said, “Don’t worry about me! Go for it!”

“Roger!” Nodding, Ling let loose a full-power blast. Her twin cannon fired at once, scoring a direct hit on Iris. “Got her!”

At least, that’s what it seemed. But looks could be deceiving.

“Hmph. Not bad.” Iris’s seven wings wrapped around her, forming an even stronger gravity barrier. One which could completely absorb Ling’s impact cannon shots.

“Th-This is some kind of bad joke!” For once, even Ling’s face showed her frustrated terror.

Absolutely perfect defense. A fearsome offense. The Seventh Princess was truly a worthy foe.

“Ling! Look out!” Houki threw herself in front of Ling just as Djibril’s sword swung down.



“Houki! Rin!” Ichika called out, even though they couldn’t hear him.

“Ichika... You need to be by their... You need to be by Ling’s side.” Ichika didn’t want to leave Liu Yueyin alone, as fragile as he looked, weakened by his illness.

“Huh? But...”

“Don’t worry about me. Right now, you need to cheer them on.”

“Yue...”

“I’m not dead yet. Ichika. When you’re old enough, let’s have a drink together.”

Memories of happier days welled up in Ichika. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“It’ll take more than this to finish me off. We Chinese are survivors.”

“All right!”

Yueyin nodded as Ichika ran off, then turned his eyes back to the monitor showing Ling.

“Ling... Do your best.”

Ling may not have realized he was out there cheering her on. But either way, she and Houki rose again. The battle wasn't over. It had only just begun.



“Rin! Houki!” Ichika made his way as close to the battle as he could. “Watch how she moves! She’s leaving an opening!”

The desperation faded from Ling and Houki as they heard Ichika’s voice, only to be replaced by anger from Iris and Djibril.

“You’re not cheering for me? Unforgivable!”

“Lèse-majesté!”

Two glares aimed themselves at Ichika— And this was the opening Ling and Houki had been waiting for.

“Houki! Covering fire!”

“Got it!”

Ling purged her package, not just lightening herself but also leaving two drones ready to make kamikaze strikes from the sides. Coolly, precisely, Iris tracked the drones. Ling had realized that, graceful and powerful as Iris was, her reactions were slow.

“Huh?! Are you—” Iris began to fire her Graviton Cluster at Ling, but rather than dodging, she kept pushing forward.

“I’ve found the one thing you can’t do! You can’t react fast!”

It wasn’t regal grace. It was her Graviton Cluster and Gravity Shield, together, pushing her reactor to its limits. Meaning, both were slow to activate. This was Seventh Princess’s weak point.

“Not so fast!” Djibril dashed in to keep Ling away from her princess. But they had seen that coming, too.

“CHESTOOOOOO!” With a single focusing shout, Houki slashed with both her blades, driving her back. “Five seconds, Ling!”

“That’s enough!” Ling slashed down with her Souten Gagetso scimitar, kicking at the same time. And no matter how strong her defenses were, Iris was too slow to deal with a pincer attack from a single foe.

“Hmph. Is that all you’ve got?!”

“Too slow!” Somersaulting in the air, Ling finished by reaching out and grabbing Iris by the shoulders, her hands forcing their way through the energy shield. “Eat this! Zero-range Impact Cannon!”

Blam!, the blast echoed.

“You—!” Iris tried to push Ling away, but her inexperience in combat showed as all she could do was twist awkwardly.



“You’re not getting away!”

Blam! Blam! Two more full-power shots at close range. The cannon barrels began to crack from the sheer force pouring through them.

“Hold on just a little longer, Shenlong!”

With one last blast, she crashed to the ground, taken down by her own weapons cooking off.

“Houki!” Ling called out for her teammate to finish the fight.

As Houki’s blades ground against her foe’s, her eyes gleamed. “I’m on it!”

Abandoning any focus on defense, Houki, blades still crossed with Djibril, fired her Ugachi energy cannon at Iris.

“Iris!” Djibril threw down her sword and dove to cover her princess. “Ahhhhhh!”

Taking the full brunt of the blast, she crashed to earth.

“And if this is on the ground—” Ling purged the dented, blasted scraps of armor she had left, and rushed at the disarmed Djibril with newfound speed. Meanwhile, Houki raised her blades over Iris.

“Look out, Princess!”

Iris heard her warning, but still didn’t know what to do in a situation like this. In every previous fight, her foes had fallen before her superior firepower. The flow of battle had always carried her forward. But that had changed. No, it had *been* changed.

“A-Ahh...” Iris’s will wasn’t strong enough to handle the true stress of battle. As she saw a blade swing for her, her face twisted in terror.

“That’s enough!” A cry flew between them like an arrow. It was Ichika’s voice. “You’ve already won. Right, Rin, Houki?”

They sheathed their weapons.

“I suppose.”

“Yeah, it was a piece of cake!”

The emotions swirling through Iris turned to rage as her opponents basked in their victory.

“What are you talking about?! I... I haven’t lost yet!” It may have been one last, no-one-wins desperate attack, but Iris was still committed.

Until Djibril’s voice pulled her back, “Please, no! Iris! Please! Please, this is over!”

“Et tu—” As her will wavered, a single tear fell upon her forehead. “You’re... You’re crying...”

“I... I just want you to be safe... Please, stop...” Djibril pleaded. Her usual force, her pride, her grace, were now only tears. Yet the tears were just as much for her princess’s sake.

“...Understood.”

Iris yielded.



“So, uh.” Houki and friends were enjoying a victory feast in the dining hall, beneath a banner simply reading ‘Victory!’ Meanwhile, Iris and Djibril looked on with chagrined frowns. “Rin, your dad—”

After the match, Ling had met with her father. Ichika had wanted to come along, but she refused. The reunion had gone well, though, judging by the smile on her face.

“Yeah, that was a thing that happened. Mom showed up too.”

“Huh?”

Ling, back to her normal blasé self, answered through a mouthful of fries, “That part was kind of a mess. Ugh, I don’t understand *why* doing that was supposed to be for my sake anyway. He’s crazy.”

Yueyin must have had a hard time standing up to two women in a family squabble. Ichika couldn’t help but imagine him trying to keep up with the dual-pronged attack.

“Yeah, maybe he is. But maybe he’s just crazy for his little girl.” It seemed that they’d reconciled, and were going to remarry. Ichika didn’t have the nerve to ask what, exactly, had happened to his cancer. “Well, anyway. All’s well that ends well.”

“What do you mean, ‘ends well’?! Even I don’t understand what he was trying to do there!” Ichika tried to calm her down, but it wasn’t until he moved on to headpats that her complaints stopped. “Ahh...”

“.....?”

“Oh, nothing!” At least it seemed like she was happy with that. The tension left her as she blushed.

...And just as quickly, rose in Iris.

“How long are you going to keep doing that?! A-Anyway! I certainly have no intention of returning to my country alone!

“Wha? ...Huh?”

As Ichika gawked in confusion, Iris waved an application form under his nose.

“Look at this!” It was true. ‘APPROVED’ was stamped right across it. “I’m going to be your classmate, Ichika!”

“Ahaha...”

It looked like his peaceful school life was... Well, ‘over’ would imply it had existed in the first place. But at least as a classmate he wouldn’t have to treat her like literal royalty. (And she wouldn’t have to act the part, either.) It wouldn’t have surprised him if her older siblings had been all for the idea.

“Good to see your family can get behind whatever you choose for yourself, Alice.” He patted her head just like he had Ling’s.

“Mm...” As he did, her anger faded away just as he planned.

“Anyway! You know what we do with losers, right?” Ms. Yamada appeared, grinning from ear to ear.

“Maya! You can do anything you want to me, but please, spare the princess!”

Maya’s glasses gleamed as Djibril cried out. “Anything I want, huh? You all heard her say that, right?”

“Ugh...”

“Ufufu. Like, maybe...” Maya whispered in Djibril’s ear, a devilish smile on her face. As she listened, Djibril flushed a crimson red. “Oh, my. I’d thought an Imperial Knight wouldn’t be so... squeamish.”

“Don’t taunt me like that! That... That’s nothing!”

“I was hoping you’d say that!” With obvious glee, Maya pulled out a paper shopping bag. “Why don’t you go get changed into this?”

“Okay, fine... Hey, wait! Where did you even get this?! I thought I had it—” It was only then that Djibril realized her fatal mistake so many years before.

“I guess it was a mistake to leave everything to me when you left.”

“That’s no fair, Maya!”

“Oh, it’s perfectly fair. Now hurry along and get changed, Gibby.”

“Maya... I’m going to kill you. Someday. As soon as I figure out how.”

“Tee-hee.” This was a side of Ms. Yamada that her students had never seen before, and they watched eagerly to see exactly what she’d baited Djibril into.

It was an IS Academy uniform.



“Ugh... I can’t believe I’m wearing this in my twenties...” She was obviously embarrassed by the high, high hemline of the skirt, to Maya’s cruel pleasure.

“Everyone, meet your new classmate, Djibril. Be sure to make her feel right at home.”

“Wait! If I’m stuck here, wasn’t it supposed to be as a teacher?!”

“Really? I’m pretty sure I heard you turn that offer down. And if you don’t want to be a teacher, well, there’s only one option left.” Maya stuck out her tongue, taking obvious pleasure at her victory.

“This is so humiliating...”

“Uh, I mean, it *does* look good on you?” Ichika said. His warm words were met with cold steel.

“You little—”

“N-No, wait! I meant that as a compliment! So why...”

Djibril’s mind raced, imagining her future, as she chased after him.

“Ugh, whatever! I don’t care anymore! Just kill me now!” She passed her sword to Ichika.

It was only Princess Iris—no, now, just Iris, a fellow student, who calmed her down.

“It hurts to see you like this, Djibril. I’ve made my peace with my own future as Alice. The least you could do is follow my example.”

“But, Princess!”

“Call me Alice!”

“Understood... Princess Alice...”

It took another half hour to drive it into her head that the ‘princess’ part was no longer necessary.



“Djibril.”

“Yes, Alice?”

In a room in the IS Academy first year dorms, Iris spoke from one of a pair of beds lined up side by side. “My brothers, my sisters... They must really care for me.”

She understood, now, why she had been given her own IS. And she regretted her own embrace of her position as the spoiled youngest sibling. Her father and mother had died soon after her birth, and her six siblings had battled for authority. She’d always wished that she could have staked her own claim. But she’d always thought that the gift of an IS had been specifically to remove her from the picture.

“Maybe they were trying to spare me the burden of the crown...” Iris trailed off.

It may have been a noble path, but certainly not a royal one. But,

it had bought her freedom. A path to survival, no matter what twists and turns palace intrigue led down. That's what Seventh Princess meant to her.

"Alice, I think you'd make a wonderful queen."

An open heart, willing to take on the burdens of the people, was the true mark of fitness to rule. And it wasn't only her siblings who had hoped that someday she'd develop it. Djibril, always by her side, had felt the same. When she'd observed young IS trainees, Djibril had always been sure to grant them an audience with the Princess. And she'd always been impressed by Iris's youthful earnestness and royal magnanimity.

"Anyway, Djibril."

"What is it?"

"Do... Do you know how to make guys like you?"

"What?!"

When Iris had said 'guys', she had obviously meant Ichika.

"...I think you should give up on Orimura Ichika," Djibril bluntly replied.

"What?! Who even mentioned Ichika?! Who? When? Where?!" If it hadn't been obvious even beforehand, her idea of bringing him back to Luxembourg would have made it clear. "Anyway! Djibril! I know someone like *you* has to have a lot of experience with men! Don't you?"

"I, uhh, yeah, of course I do! I'm an Imperial Knight! Obviously I have a boyfriend for each day of the week!"

That was a dangerous lie to tell, and the danger was in it being believed—which it was.

"Oh really? That sounds like a lot of fun!"

Djibril tried her hardest to not sigh out loud as she sunk deeper into her mattress. To be completely truthful, she'd never even held hands with a male, nevermind going any further.

"So you know *exactly* how to get a guy to fall for me?"

"Y-Yes..."

A new chapter in their strange master-and-servant yet teacher-and-pupil relationship was beginning.

Chapter III: Crimson Smoke, Snow, Moon, Flowers

“Umm...”

Tatenashi, Kanzashi, and Maya stared, frowning, at the White Tail: Byakushiki’s third form, returned from Operation Swordbreaker on Christmas Day.

“Huh, something wrong with it?” Ichika had been assigned to coffee duty, and as he returned nonchalantly tried to get a feel for the situation.

“You see how different it looks? That’s nothing compared to how much the internals have changed.”

“It’s basically a black box... I’m not even sure how we’re supposed to do basic maintenance on it.”

“The weapons loadout’s been changed a lot, too. Yukihiro Nigata is still there, but the particle cannon’s been removed, the shield is gone, and then there’s, well, *that*.” Maya raised an eyebrow at the extremely obvious energy wing now mounted on Byakushiki’s back, “From what we’ve been able to determine, it’s the same kind of field as Reiraku Byakuya. And it incorporates the O.V.E.R.S. too, so it’s likely to be far less of an energy load.”

“I’m curious about the new one-off ability, too...” Kanzashi thought out loud.

“That’s right! Exactly! The ability to reformat any IS? That’s dangerous! *Too* dangerous!”

As if that wasn’t enough, its joints were equipped with variable-sweep armor as well. Describing the White Tail meant basically writing an encyclopedic list of high-end features which had been seen on other IS, all wrapped up in one sleek package rather than the clunky armor pieces which were standard.

“So it really needs a more impressive name than White Tail.”

In response, Ichika hopped in, the armor folding around him almost skin-tight.

“Well, I did get this new status readout.” He gestured, opening up a projection window starting with the text ‘Byakushiki 3rd Form OURI.’ “That sure looks like its name to me.”

He then continued with preflight checks. Byakushiki’s responsiveness was far beyond its original levels, and it seemed almost like an extension of his own body; movements didn’t just feel swifter

than before, they felt more natural, more *right*.

“Does it have any other new weapons, Ichika?” Tatenashi was, for once, legitimately curious about something.

“I’m not really sure about new weapons, but there is this new ‘Code White’ subsystem listed— Wait, huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

Ichika looked at the projection in confusion as it refused to scroll down.

“That’s weird, it’s not there now. Huh, was I just imagining it?” Sighing, he closed down Byakushiki, which dematerialized as always into a gauntlet on his right hand.

“Either way. We’re definitely going to have to take a closer look at Byakushiki. Charl’s IS, too.”

Rein Carnation. The world’s first dual-core IS. Who could know what capabilities that meant? And as much of an upgrade as it was from the Revive, that just meant a lot more fine-tuning for now. Two cores, though. Was its maximum output double the Revive’s? The Revive’s, squared? And would that be usable in combat, or just make it harder to control?

“Charl’s practicing in the third arena, isn’t she?” Ichika asked.

“Yeah. It should be fine, Laura and Ms. Orimura are helping her out.” Tatenashi paused in contemplation for a moment, then spoke. “I know! You should do a mock battle with her!”

“Are you sure?!”

“It’d be a great opportunity to learn just what your new IS can do.”

“Yeah... It’s important to get some combat flight hours in.”

“If we’re going with that, I’ll talk to Ms. Orimura about it. Ichika, you should head up to the arena.”

It seemed all present other than Ichika were in agreement, and he wasn’t going to argue. As he left, though, he suddenly yelped as a hand wrapped around a buttcheek and squeezed. “Gwuh?!”

“Hey there, hot stuff. How’s it hangin’?” It was, of course, Kagaribi Hikaruno, In her usual outfit of a school swimsuit-type IS suit, white lab coat, and pushed-up swim goggles. At least they’d taken away her fishing rod.

“Wh-what are you doing here?!”

“I had a few errands to take care of anyway, so I figured, why not get my hands on some beefcake?”

“What do you mean, beefcake?!”

“Ahahahah, don’t get so mad. Anyway, see you later!” Hikaruno disappeared as quickly as she’d arrived.

“What’s with her...”

Brushing the seat of his pants off, Ichika stepped into the third

arena's IS maintenance pit.



“♪ *J'aime l'oignon frit à l'huile, j'aime l'oignon, j'aime l'oignon. Un seul oignon frit à l'huile, un seul oignon nous change en Lion* ♪”

Charlotte half-hummed the famous French marching song *Chanson de l'Oignon* to herself as she worked on her IS.

“Um... Charl?”

“Eeek!” It wasn't a song she would have chosen if she had expected company. Especially not when that company was Ichika.

“Were... Were you listening?”

“Yeah, I came in around the part about onions.”

“That was the whole thing!”

Charlotte's face turned redder and redder. Ichika tried to calm her down with a headpat as he turned his eyes to the Rein Carnation.

“Well, that's pretty different.”

“So is Byakushiki now.”

“Honestly, I think yours changed even more, Charl. I mean, the internals are Revive's, but it looks more like Cosmos from the outside.”

“I guess. I think I should be able to split it, but then I'd have to control them both, and I'm not sure I'd be able to keep up.” Her smile made it clear that she also wasn't sure she *wouldn't* be able to keep up.

“Really?! Two IS, one pilot?”

“Yeah. I'd probably have to have Cosmos mostly on autopilot, though.”

“Wow, that's really impressive.”

Charlotte leapt up into the cockpit. “Let me show you!”

“Sure.”

A shimmer of light enveloped the Rein Carnation, and afterward, Charlotte stood in her old Revive, controlling the Cosmos like a puppet on strings.

“I'm still working on it, but I think it'll be a really effective tactic.”

“Agreed. I mean, it's doubling your firepower. Actually, though, y'know. I was thinking of doing a mock battle so we can see exactly what our new IS are capable of. Do you have time right now?”

Charlotte's eyes gleamed as she called back Cosmos. “Yeah! That sounds great!”

She hopped down from her cockpit and took Ichika's hand. Her enthusiasm for the idea was beginning to make him a little embarrassed. “Oh, uh. Is that a new IS suit?”

“Yeah. It's pretty much the same as the last one, just a different size.”

“A different size?”

“Yeah, the old one was getting a little too tight up here...” Ichika’s eyes followed to exactly where ‘here’ meant. “Jeez! Ichika, you pervert!”

Charlotte folded her arms over her chest, only succeeding in accentuating its pulchritudinosity.



“No, wait, I was just, uhh... Sorry.” To the girls’ relief, Ichika had at least learned to apologize when he did something like that. Though the loss of his previous naïve honesty presented its own problem. “Anyway! About that mock battle!”

“Yeah!”

And so, two newly-reborn IS were about to clash.



“Your shotgun’s just as effective as ever!” Ichika regretted the loss of his shield as he extended his new energy wing into a barrier. The wing, much like the Revive’s old Garden Curtain package, was useful both offensively and defensively.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to deal with that wing. Maybe like this?” Charlotte ducked back, casting aside her shotgun—which was out of ammo anyway—and readying her Vertu II hybrid rifle.

“Gwuh?!” Ichika was already committed to closing in, and wasn’t expecting a direct attack.

“Got you, Ichika!” Energy swirled around the bullets as they launched toward Ichika at close range.

“Not so fast!” Tossing Yukihiro Nigata into his left hand, he grabbed the rifle’s barrel and pointed it away.

“Wha?! Are you crazy?!”

Crazy or no, the maneuver was effective, and her shots flew harmlessly by as he extended his energy wing to wrap around her.

“This is my new trick!” A flurry of feathers launched out at Charlotte, just like the Silverio Gospel’s energy shots. “You’re not the only one with a new power-up!”

Rather than attempting to escape, she gathered her own multi-wing thrusters, forming an energy shield.

“Let’s see who gives up first, Charl!”

“It’s gonna be you, Ichika!”

A close-range hail of fire rained down and the sound of slashes filled the air. The moment seemed to last an eternity before both IS, drained of energy, sank to the ground.



“Ichika!”

“Yeah?”

As Ichika relaxed in the locker room, still in his IS suit, Charlotte entered with two drinks. She was still in her IS suit too—probably hadn’t showered.

“You were amazing! That really caught me off guard.” His new

initiative under fire had surprised—and intrigued—Charlotte. “You know, Ichika? We should do this more often. I think we can learn a lot from each other.”

“Sure! Let’s try not to make Laura too jealous, though.”

“Ahahah. Good luck with that. Anyway, though. Promise me?”

Charlotte sat down next to Ichika as she handed him a drink. “Oh, and I wanted to thank you. I’m really grateful for everything you did for me in France.”

“Mm? Nah, don’t worry about it. I think any guy would’ve done the same.” Ichika casually shrugged it off as he took a sip. The cool, refreshing flow in his throat felt great after a workout like that.

“Mmm. I needed that.”

As Charlotte looked over at him, she gulped nervously. “Um, hey, Ichika.”

“Hm?”

“Well, um... Do you really think I’m any good at being a girl?”

“Huh? Yeah, of course you are.”

“Well, yeah, but... Ugh, I don’t even know how to say it.” She leaned in toward him, raw emotion welling up her eyes. “I guess... I guess I mean, at being the kind of girl you like...” Her hand came to rest on top of Ichika’s. “I mean... I’m a girl. I have needs, too.”

“I, I get it...”

Those wide eyes swallowed up the entire world around Ichika, before closing as she brought her face up to his. He froze up, not sure how to react—until he was ‘saved’ by a combat knife flying between them.

“Yikes!”

“I made sure to miss. *This* time.” Laura stood, her hands on her hips, dark clouds of rage swirling around her as she slid another knife from its sheath. Whatever mercy had bought him that respite was completely gone.

“Charlotte!”

“Y-Yes?!”

Laura turned toward her friend.

“Explain yourself.” Her eyes were feral. There was no trace of humanity left.

“I, I just, I mean, you know? One thing leads to another? Well, one thing *led* to another!”

“Oh, don’t give me that!” Laura shot back. “The only ‘leading’ going on was you leading my bride straight back to your bedroom! Or do you have some other excuse too?”

“Listen! He doesn’t just belong to you!” Charlotte found her footing and went on the attack as sparks flew between her and Laura.

As Ichika tried to sneak off, his escape route was blocked by

gunfire.

“And where are *you* going?”

“Resistance is futile!”

Caught between Scylla and Charybdis, Ichika had only made it worse for himself by drawing the attention of them both.

“Wait, don’t I get to have an opinion about this?!”



“Grrr.”

“Hmph.”

Charlotte and Laura stared each other down across a table, the intensity of their stares more than making up for their lack of words.

“So, everything good? I can leave now?” Ichika tentatively asked. A quick piercing glare from each was enough to shut him up.

“You know, Laura, you’re just too selfish,” Charlotte said.

“Me? You’re talking down to *me*? After your whole act where you dressed up in drag to sleep wi—sleep in Ichika’s room?”

The silence was over. A war of words—with mutually-assured destruction—had begun. The battlefield was the IS Academy dining hall. Whispers spread like wildfire around the other tables.

“Full mobilization in the battle for Orimura, huh.”

“The cold war’s gone hot.”

“I’m surprised that the two who always seemed to get along are the first to really get into it.”

“Orimura the friendship destroyer.”

Ichika couldn’t stand it anymore, and stood up.

“Hey, wait, Ichika!”

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

He sighed before firing back, “Just chill for a second, okay?”

Charlotte and Laura were both taken aback by his sudden forcefulness, but as he strode off toward the kitchen to talk with the lunch lady, they began to argue again.

“See? You made him mad, Laura!”

“What are you talking about? It’s because you wouldn’t listen to him!” The battle was joined again. As it raged on, Ichika returned with dessert.

“Why don’t you two make up over this?” In his hands was a huge parfait, with two spoons stuck in it. “Orimura Ichika’s miracle jumbo parfait!”

It was probably too much for just the two of them, honestly. Heaping portions of fresh fruit and a mountain of whipped cream. Chocolate sauce *and* strawberry jam. A total calorie bomb. Yet sweet enough for neither of them to care.

“Have some. It’ll cheer you up,” he urged. Somehow, this was less

than convincing.

“Nah.”

“I don’t want any.”

Charlotte and Laura turned their noses up in indignation.

As Ichika sighed, wondering how he was going to deal with this, Cecilia passed by.

“Oh dear, Ichika. What seems to be the matter?” She was completely oblivious to what was going on. Which gave him an idea...

“Cecilia, have this parfait.”

“E-Eh? But I’m on a diet right now...” She shied away from the gigantic confection, but Ichika knew just how to cajole her. It just took a bit of sweet talk.

“Huh, I don’t think you need to be on a diet,” he said. “Nothing wrong with some curves. Plus, I’ll feed it to you.”

Scooping up some whipped cream in a spoon, he raised it to Cecilia’s mouth. A silvered tongue, an imposing presence, and special attention. The three ways to a maiden’s heart.

“Very well, then!” As Cecilia’s lips wrapped around the spoon, Laura and Charlotte’s eyes narrowed.

“Charl and Laura don’t seem to want any, so I guess it’s all yours. Say ‘ahh!’”

“Ahh...” Cecilia was obviously enjoying this, and kept on eating.

“Hey, hold on a—” As Charlotte started to object, Ling passed by too, and completely drowned her out.

“Hold it right there! What are you two doing?! This is public indecency right here!”

Ichika lifted a spoon to her as well. “Say ‘ahh.’”

“Mmn... Glm.”

“How is it?”

“Ehh.” It was so sudden that Ling barely even tasted it. But she was beginning to appreciate this more assertive side of Ichika. “I want some of that apple.”

“Sure, fine.”

Ling pulled a slice of apple from the parfait and bit down.

“I suppose I’ll try the kiwi, then,” Cecilia said.

“Okay.” Ling and Cecilia, with Ichika’s help, were making short work of the fruit in the parfait. All Charlotte and Laura could do was look on, green with envy, as the corners of their lips became embarrassingly moist.

“Ugh...”

Still, though, neither was willing to show weakness in front of their rival. It was almost like Ichika was making a show of things to tease them for their stubbornness.

“Here, Ling. Try some of the pineapple,” Ichika said.

“Mm. I guess.”

“Cecilia, the chocolate whipped cream is excellent.”

“Of course! Thank you.”

And then, the parfait was gone.

“That was great.”

“I simply must return the favor sometime.”

Ling and Cecilia got in their last few moments of basking in the attention before leaving with self-satisfied grins.

“I should head back to my room, too.” Ichika snuck a final glance at Charlotte and Laura.

“Ichika, you...”

“Me, what?”

“You idiot!”

Twin punches to the gut. And they fled while he was still writhing in pain.

“Well... I guess I at least... Got them back on the same page...”

With a thud, he crumpled to the ground.



“Ugh...” Ichika drifted back to consciousness in his own bed.

As he wondered who’d carried him back to his room, Djibril, wearing her street clothes, stepped in. “So you’re awake now. I thought you had more in you than that, Orimura Ichika.”

They may have been street clothes, but they were still snappy and stylish in a way girls his age could never pull off. A pantsuit. Pierced ears. Her IS was in standby mode as a sword on her hip. She looked, in a word, awesome.

“Djibril? What are you doing here?”

“Well, you know...”

As she was about to explain, Iris wandered in. “Umm...”

“Go ahead, Alice.”

“Okay.” Lifting a package, she held it out to Ichika, her trepidation palpable. “I-I made cookies. I mean, it’s something I should know how to do as a normal girl.”

“Wow! Homemade cookies?” She had bandages on her fingers where she must have burnt herself on the oven. “For me?”

“No, I just— Well, yeah, for you, but— I need you to taste them to make sure they’re not poisoned!”

How, exactly, something she made herself would be poisoned was a question that rose in Ichika’s mind, even though he decided not to press the issue. He unwrapped the package to find a pile of Dutch-style bitterkoekjes. They weren’t all the same shape, and some were done more than others, but it was the thought that counted.

“Thanks, Alice. Guess I should make some tea, then.”

“Huh? Wha? You’re going to have them now?”

“It’s a great opportunity for a tea party. Don’t you think so, Djibril?”

“Of course.”

While Ichika was brewing the tea, Iris and Djibril whispered to each other.

“Do you really think this will work?” Iris asked.

“Of course it will! Do you even know how many men I’ve charmed by baking for them?”

That was a lie. Djibril had spent an afternoon or two reading shoujo manga and, when she wasn’t clapping a hand over her mouth or both of her eyes, taking detailed notes. And, of course, she’d never baked anything herself... One supposes it’s never too late to start learning, though.

“Alice, Djibril, tea’s ready.” With three full teacups on the table, it was time to finally try the cookies. “Let’s see how these came out.”

Ichika took a bite... And immediately spit it out.

“Phbbbt! Y-You mixed up the sugar with the salt! And wait, did you use mayo instead of cream too?!” Ichika’s face was a sickly green, and Iris looked up at Djibril with watering eyes.

“Orimura Ichika! How dare you insult Alice’s cookies!” They were her idea, so of course she’d try to deflect blame.

“Seriously! Try one if you don’t believe me!”

“Hmph! There’s no way they’re as bad as— Blech!” Djibril grabbed her tea and took a deep gulp as she spit the cookie out.

Meanwhile, Iris was on the verge of tears. “I... I guess I’ll just throw them out...”

As she stretched out her hand, though, Ichika and Djibril stopped her. They devoured the remaining cookies in a flash— Not least, to get the taste out of their mouths as quickly as possible.

“Of, of course we’d eat your c-cookies, right?” Ichika asked, glancing at Djibril.

“It’s, it’s the highest honor... Highest honor a knight could receive.”

Sweat dripped down their brows.

“You fools...” Iris was glad they were so concerned about her feelings, but also embarrassed at just what her mistake had brought about. That mix of emotions was definitely a step on the path to being a normal girl.

“Thanks, Alice. I appreciate you making them.” As Ichika patted her head, Iris shyly looked away.

“A-anyway. Ichika, can you go over some IS homework with me?”

“Oh, right. They’re bumping you up to a first year right away, aren’t they. Yeah, I’ll help out.” Ichika wasn’t a particularly gifted

student, but that didn't mean he couldn't provide some useful insight. "What with?"

Iris, smiling, opened her textbook. "Right here! It's about the theory and practical application of shield energy saturation. I'm still having a little trouble with it."

"Oh, yeah. I didn't get that at all at first." As he looked around for Djibril just in case, though, he noticed that she'd disappeared. "Huh? Where'd Djibril go?"

"Dunno. Probably back to her room."

Ichika would never expect that Iris and Djibril had planned this.

You two are alone together now, Alice. Good luck! There was a spring in her step as she walked down the hall back to her room. But unluckily for her, she encountered Maya on the way.

"Oh, my! If it isn't Djibril!"

"Maya..."

Maya leaned in with a mocking smile toward the 20-year-old second-time high schooler. "How is everything? Enjoying school life?"

"Ugh... When you said we'd settle the score two years ago, I didn't realize this is what you had in mind."

"You're such a naughty student." Maya chuckled. She leaned in and whispered in Djibril's ear. "Come to my room later. I've got a bottle of the good stuff."

"...Understood." As Djibril's face flushed red, Maya happily skipped off. "Ugh, she's still got me wrapped around her finger..."

Djibril thought back to their school years. Maya may have grown up into a punctilious woman, but she had definitely had more than a whiff of the bohemian about her in her school days. It went without saying that Chifuyu had been a major influence behind that change.

"Phew..." Djibril let out a deep, deep sigh.



"It's already past ten. We should wrap things up for tonight, Alice." As Ichika announced the end of her lesson, Iris fell silent, seeming strangely anxious. "Alice? You should probably head back to your room."

"Yeah... I guess..."

"We've got a really, really terrifying RA here. If she catches you, she'll put you through—"

"Oh, really? Tell me more about this terrifying RA." Ichika slowly turned his head toward the sudden new participant in the conversation— Chifuyu, her arms crossed, wearing a sweatsuit. "Orimura."

"Y-Yes!"

"Just how many girls are you planning on luring back to your

room this year, anyway? And a princess this time? Shameful.”

A shiver went down his spine. He didn't have the nerve to remind her that he had rarely had any say in the matter.

“I-I'm not that kind of girl!” Iris glared at Chifuyu, some sort of determination obvious in her gaze.

“Right. Whatever. De Luxembourg, you can sleep here tonight.”

“Eh?!”

“Really?!”

It was hard to say whether Iris or Ichika was more surprised.

“Don't get me wrong. I said *sleep*. Not anything else.” With that said, Chifuyu departed, leaving the two to take in what was happening.

“Um...” Ichika was the first to speak, as Iris's nervousness had only increased.

“Did you bring pajamas?” She shook her head from side to side. Thinking for a moment, he pulled out a freshly-cleaned shirt. “I guess you can wear this, then. You okay with that?”

“Yeah...”

Staying overnight in a boy's room. Even sleeping in one of his shirts. It was just too much for her.

“I've got a disposable toothbrush you can use. How about lotion and stuff? Do you want to go borrow some?”

“No, one night will be fine. I'm still young.”

Ichika wasn't quite sure how to make sense out of that, but nodded along anyway. “Okay, then. I'll wait in the hall while you change.”

As a strange sense of déjà vu washed over him, Iris spoke up almost insistently, “No, it's fine! You can stay right there!”

“Huh?”

“You helped me change before, right? So it's fine!”

Ichika stared at her, trying to remember, and as he did her face flushed red as she began to yell, “But turn around at least! Are you an idiot?!”

“Oh, uh, sorry.” Turning to face the wall, he heard her clothes slide off. He hadn't really thought through the implications before, but he was definitely thinking about them now. “Um...”

“You can turn back around.”

As he did, he caught just a glimpse of her white panties below his spare shirt.

“You fool!” Nervously, she tugged the shirt's hem down. Ichika couldn't help but smile at how adorable the reaction was.

“What?! What are you laughing about?!”

“Honestly, you're a lot cuter doing that than when you're acting like a princess,” he said.

“C-Cute?!” Iris stumbled over her words, not quite able to accept it but still happy to hear it.

“Anyway, let’s get some sleep. You can use the bed by the window.”

“Okay.”

As they each got into bed, the lights turned out. But then, after lying silently for a while, Iris worked up her nerve and spoke up, “I... I want to sleep together...”

“Whaa?” Ichika couldn’t imagine that ending well, but the idea of having a spoiled little sister like her was starting to take over his decision making. “Okay, but behave.”

“Okay!”

Through the darkness, Iris made her way to his bed. As she slipped under the covers, his broad shoulders, his body, head, and the sound of his breath all made her heart pound.

“Oh my... Oh my, oh my...”

“Mm?”

“Um... Ichika... I feel so lonely with you facing away from me...”

She really did sound so lonely that Ichika felt like he had no choice but to turn around and wrap his arms around her. “Like this?”

“Ahh...!” Iris nodded nervously as she blushed bright red, and in response, Ichika patted her head. “You’re treating me like a little kid...”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Hmph...”

Iris must have been exhausted from studying, as it didn’t take her long to fall asleep. Sighing, Ichika patted her head again.

“Good night, Alice.”

Soon after, he fell asleep as well.



Iris yawned blearily, and then her eyes snapped wide open. Under the blankets, Ichika’s arms were still around her. She pinched herself to see if it was just a dream, and the pain was real. *What’s going on? Why is Ichika... What on earth happened?!*

She still hadn’t woken up enough to remember the night before. Why was Ichika sharing a bed with her? Where *was* she? Her pulse raced at the warmth of Ichika’s body next to her. She was close enough to feel him breathe.

“Ahhh...” Unsure of what to do, she curled up, her face crimson. But moments of bliss like this never last long.

“Good morning, Alice. I came to— What?!” Djibril stepped into the room, only to find two people in one bed. It was too much for someone with so little experience with men to take, and she snapped.

“Orimura Ichika! You, you—!”

Tearing the covers off, she delivered a forceful kick to Ichika.

“Grrrrrah!” He rolled to the wall, making a noise like an accidentally-stepped-on cat.

“Death, death to you! I’ll take your head myself!” Djibril unsheathed her sword, the standby mode of her IS. The Imperial Knight had once been a bracelet in standby mode, but upon attaining Second Shift a year before had changed form into a blade. And now that blade thrust toward Ichika.

“W-W-W-Wait!” Iris cried out.

“Alice! Why stop me?! After what this man has done to you...”

“I-I forgive him!” Her face was red as she almost yelled.

“...What?” Djibril and Ichika’s heads both slowly turned toward her.

“We-We’re like that now! Even Orimura Chifuyu approved!”

“...Huh?” Djibril was as stunned as Ichika was. Not to mention the girls from neighboring rooms who had turned out to see what the commotion was.

“I, I’m going to marry Ichika!” The world faded to white around Djibril. Meanwhile, Ichika had no idea what was going on. But the other girls sure did.

“Has Orimura’s time finally come?!”

“Is this the end of the Orimura harem?!”

“No! Long live the Orimura Kingdom!”

“Long live our fatherland!”

If he had thought he was confused before, this put him on a whole other level. And then, the other cadets overheard. Thus began Ichika’s descent into hell.



The scene: the largest table in the dining hall at breakfast. Ichika was strapped to a guillotine as the cadets conducted a witch trial. (There were centuries of precedent for calling it a witch trial even if the accused was a man. Which didn’t make a huge amount of sense, really, but who are we to argue?)

“My neck hurts...” Ichika exclaimed bluntly.

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?!” Houki unsheathed her katana. One way or the other, his goose was cooked.

“What is the meaning of this, Ichika?! Explain yourself!” Cecilia was beside herself with rage, charging her sniper rifle even as she spoke.

“I thought we settled this already!” Ling gave Ichika a swift kick to the rear. With the leg parts of her IS opened, it hurt. A lot.

“So, Ichika, would you rather the pile bunker or the shotgun? I’ll

let you pick.” Charlotte was grinning from ear to ear even as she hefted a weapon in each hand.

“I’ve heard a faithless bride is a groom’s failure, but I wasn’t expecting you to prove it.” Laura pressed the muzzle of her meter Mauser to his temple, her face contorted with stress.

“Time to die, Ichika...” Kanzashi sawed at the guillotine’s rope, her expression terrifyingly blank.

“I’m disappointed in you, Ichika. And is it just me or is it getting hot in here?” Tatenashi gritted her teeth as she spread Mysterious Lady’s nanomachines, veins bulging on her forehead.



“Please, listen!” Ichika cried.

“**Mmhm?**” The girls leaned in to listen.

“Sure, Alice stayed in my room last night,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Sure, she slept there.”

“**That’s the problem!**”

Ichika’s seeming inability to understand the situation had them at wit’s end.

“Why was she even in your room, never mind sleeping there?!”

“I have no idea!” he pleaded.

“You should die for this, Ichika!”

“That’s right!”

“I’ll finish you off myself. Feel grateful. Ahahah.”

“Orimura Ichika. It’s time to pay for your sins...”

“Ichika... Tonight you’re going to sleep a lot less comfortably.”

Just as they’d finished saying their pieces, the guillotine’s rope finally snapped. Its merciless blade swung down toward his neck. And suddenly, just as they realized what they’d done.

“.....?!”

Suddenly, a hail of lasers rained down on the dining hall. As most girls ran for cover and the cadets readied their IS, a squad of crimson IS like they’d never seen before descended.

“What the—”

There were at least ten of them. That many IS was remarkable on its own. More so, that they were all the same mass-produced type. And even more so, that instead of pilots, strange mechanical mannequins sat in their cockpits.

“What the heck is going on?!” Tumbling to safety, Ichika opened his own IS, getting ready to fight.

The squadron of enemy IS soon spotted their target—Houki.

[TARGET CONFIRMED. BEGINNING EXTRACTION.] Cold, mechanical voices echoed in unison. All dozen or so of the drones grabbed Houki at once, and immediately attempted to withdraw.

“What are you doing?! Let me go!” Houki struggled, but their grip on her was too strong. Ropes of an energy she’d never seen before wrapped around her even as she tried to open her own IS.

“**ICHIKAAAA!**” Houki reached out to him, straining for his hand, but found only air.

Ichika took flight as fast as he could to follow her.

“You’re not getting away!” He chased after the drones, with the other cadets not far behind. “Charl! Suppressive fire! Laura! Blast them! Cecilia! Start sniping!”

“Got it!”

Taking advantage of the disarray caused by their combined attack, Ichika and Ling charged forward.

“Wait, no! You can’t! Get back!” Kanzashi yelled out as she completed her analysis. No sooner did the words leave her lips than the drones self-destructed.

“.....?!” Tatenashi’s nanomachines were barely enough to protect the cadets from the blast, but they weren’t enough to stop the drones from carrying Houki away.

“HOUKI!”

Ichika’s cries fell on deaf ears.



“We’re tracking the mass-produced IS that took Shinonono.” In the underground complex beneath IS Academy, Chifuyu and the other instructors were briefing the cadets. “Oh, and there’s a gag order about this incident. Be careful not to leak any information.”

While Chifuyu was the picture of calm, Ichika was anything but, “Who cares about that?! Is Houki okay?!”

“Calm down, you idiot. We can track her vital signs, remember? Plus, they took her alive. It’s obvious that they obviously want her for something.”

“How can you be so sure about that?!”

“Just calm down! We should leave them alone until they make it to where they’re going.”

“Eh...?” Whispers began to spread. “Have you gone crazy?!”

Laura was the first to speak up, “If we know where they went, we know where they’ve taken Houki.”

“And we have some more important info about that.” Chifuyu nodded to Maya, who led another woman into the room.

“Haha... Hey there.” Kagaribi Hikaruno. Her usual goofy attitude was gone, replaced with a bundle of bandages which left it less than clear whether she still had all her limbs.

“Those mass-produced IS are from Dr. Kagaribi’s lab, Kuramochi Engineering.”

“Wha—”

Kuramochi Engineering. The original developers of not just the Byakushiki and Akatsubaki, but also the O.V.E.R.S. packs used during the Excalibur incident. The revelation that those had all just been steps in the development of the mass-produced Akebachi (‘Vermilion Hornet’) model shocked not just the cadets, but their teachers.

“A mass-produced version of the Akatsubaki?”

“O.V.E.R.S. packs need a source of energy to amplify. How are they even working without that?”

“Never mind that, how are they being controlled?”

A one-word answer was enough for the teachers. "...Tabane."

They shuddered. However much of a technical stretch that seemed, it wasn't beyond what could be expected from the inventor of the IS and only builder of IS cores. So she'd captured Kuramochi Engineering's prototypes, turned them into unmanned drones, was feeding them energy from somewhere, and had kidnapped Houki. That meant...

"She needs the original Akatsubaki and its pilot for some reason?" Tatenashi connected the dots, and Chifuyu nodded.

It was then when Ichika's anger finally broke through to the surface.

"I'm going to go save Houki!" he shouted.

"But you don't even know where she is."

"Yes I do!" Ichika opened an info display on Akatsubaki. "Here. Over the Pacific."

The crowd gasped at Byakushiki's ability to pick up signals from Akatsubaki even when it was in stealth mode.

"That has to be a trap. What even makes you think they're keeping her with her IS?"

"I... I just know. Houki's there. She's waiting for me."

"Doesn't look like there's any stopping you..." Chifuyu sighed in resignation.

"So I'm going to go save her. Even if I have to do it alone." Ichika's eyes gleamed with determination. And, for just a moment, glowed gold unnoticed.

"Understood... It's decided, then. We're rescuing Shinonono! Cadets, go over your preflights! Instructors, get ready to back them up! We deploy in forty minutes!"

The cry of 'yes, ma'am!' in unison echoed through the briefing room. And thus the operation to rescue Shinonono—the string of battles known later as the Akatsubaki Incident—began.



"How many are there?" As the cadets rushed through their checklists, Chifuyu ran down the intel with Maya.

"They'd completed six before Tabane took over, but it's a safe bet that she's produced more."

"So no reliable data on enemy strength..." Chifuyu grimaced at how hard an opponent Tabane was to read.

"Are you sure this is something IS Academy can handle on its own? We worked with the British government before, maybe we should ask the Japanese if—"

"They're not going to lift a finger. Remember?" Chifuyu barely even had to remind her of what had happened with Shirokishi. "If

whatever the problem is isn't actively stomping Tokyo Tower, they're too chickenshit to get involved. We've got to do this our way."

"But do we really have to make the students fight?!"

"Is that a problem? No... that's too harsh. Are you worried about them?"

"Yes..."

Chifuyu paused, then let out a deep breath. Then she smiled tenderly and said, "Never change, Ms. Yamada."

"That's not what I meant!"

"I know, I know. But here's how I look at it. These kids are gonna change the world someday. And this may as well be the day."

There comes a time in everyone's life when they must decide. And Chifuyu understood that the time had come for her students. It had for her, once. Now it was their turn. Would they choose the world, or—

"Engines are dialed in!"

"Weapons check, OK!"

"Ready to go anytime!"

"Assault package installation complete."

"Let's go over these tactics quickly..."

"Let's get this done!"

As the other cadets wrapped their prep up, Ichika sat alone meditating. His hands folded, his legs crossed, his mind emptied. Making sure that his heart was in the right place.

"I'm coming, Houki..." he muttered.

With that, the signal to launch appeared.

"All units, scramble!"

From the arena runways set up for use as catapults in emergencies, first Ichika, then Cecilia and Ling, Charlotte and Laura, Tatenashi and Kanzashi flew forth. Each with their own worries, their own hopes, as they soared toward the decisive battle.



Where...

The breeze on her cheeks and the waves lapping at her body brought Houki back to consciousness. A horizon which seemed to stretch off forever. Blinding white sand. And not a single living soul.

Where am I?

Alone, she walked on a patch of sand too small to be a proper desert island. Then, she stopped. "Who's there?!" she called out.

Feeling eyes on her, she turned around—and paused in shock.

"Who *are* you?!"



Another her. The darkness in her heart. The strength she always imagined having. Standing right there before her, staring at her with red eyes.

"I..." The other Houki's smile twisted into a smirk of contempt. "I will replace you."

Houki shuddered at the menace in the other *her's* eyes.

"You have no strength. So I'll replace you." Languidly, the other Houki held out her hand. Houki spun around to flee, only to see herself mirrored once again.

"You can't escape," the doppelganger's voice seemingly echoed through the air.

She couldn't.

"You can't escape from yourself." The girl before her eyes was just like her. *Was* her. "Let yourself slip away. Beneath the waves of consciousness..."

Slowly, the other Houki reached out and stroked her cheek, wiping her tears away.

That's right. I'm... Ahh, it felt so good. Such bliss.

"Giving in feels wonderful, doesn't it?" Houki felt her body begin to sink slowly into the sand. The voice of her twin sounded so soothing. "Sleep, now..."

"I..."

It drifted further and further away until she could hear it no longer. Except for the last few words.

"I'll take care of it all for you." The red-eyed Houki smiled, as a crimson IS wrapped around her. "Leave it to Akatsuki."



— "I'm picking up something manmade floating out there! It must be

The sea stretched out to the horizon, its surface broken only by the manmade island, Giga Front. It was only 200 or so square meters, but its surface absolutely bristled with shipping containers.

"It looks like a beehive," Laura said.

She was right. The unbroken field of hexagonal containers looked like a honeycomb. Then suddenly, a warning blared into view.

"Picking up drones! Four, five... No, way more!"

Giga Front shuddered as it began to rise into the air. As it broke away from the surface, it became obvious that it truly was nothing but a honeycomb of containers.

"Go forth, my Akebachi..." The cadets prepared for combat at the sudden echo of a voice.

"Look, Ichika!" Looking down on them, the sun at her back, was a

girl in what looked like a more sinister version of the Akatsubaki. Her face was young, her form lithe and delicate. A black visor covered her eyes—no, it didn't just shut her out from the world, it shut the world out from her.

"What's that IS? Where's Houki?!" Ichika turned to her, ready to leap to the attack, but Cecilia and Charlotte caught him by the shoulders.

"Wait! IR sensors are picking up something in the containers! Here they come, Ichika!"

"Dammit!" he griped. "We were almost there!"

"We still have a chance! Don't give up yet!" The cadets fanned out into a loose circle around Kanzashi, readying their weapons as Tatenashi moved to cover them.

"Enemy lock detected! It's too dangerous to go in on your own. Wait for Kanzashi's orders!"

As Ichika slumped back, Tatenashi spread out a mist of nanomachines in the path of the incoming Akebachi. Ten of the drones came flying through the wall of fire.

"Set up curtain fire, and make them close in! Don't engage until they're in melee— Ichika?!"

"We can't just sit around! Houki's waiting for me!" Ichika rushed out ahead, shocking the other cadets with a single shot that took down three Akebachis. "Out of my way!"

Ichika could feel the adrenaline running through his veins, telling him that he could do this.

"Wait, Ichika! No!" Charlotte and the others were realizing that their engines couldn't keep up. Their IS' reactor output had dropped suddenly as soon as they entered this sector. They couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't just a mechanical breakdown, something here was causing it.

"I'm coming for you, Houki!" Breaking free of Charlotte, Ichika charged at the girl in red. Charlotte chased, trying to stop him, only to be intercepted by an Akebachi.

"Wait, Ichika! Ichikaaaa!" It was like something was drawing him in, and he, and his target, disappeared into the glare of the sun. The cadets, left behind, plunged into a pitched battle.

"Ugh! Why aren't my engines working? Kanzashi, can you pick anything up?!" Laura grimaced as she yelled in confusion.

"I'm running analysis now! 'Code Red'?! A backdoor output-limiting mode...?!"

It didn't matter where it was coming from. Nothing could be done about it now. All they could do was fight as well as they could with the strength they could bring to bear.

"Time to kick some ass! Let's go, Shenlong!"

“We can do this, Blue Tears!”

“We’ll open a gap in their line! Charlotte! Laura! Follow Ichika!”

“Got it!”

The next three minutes felt like they lasted an eternity.



“I can do this! Byakushiki and I can take anyone on!”

Ichika shot down Akebachii after Akebachii, unquestioning of his newfound confidence. A squad spread out around him, their arms opening to reveal Tsukumobari, ‘99 Needles,’ beam machine guns.

“Too slow!”

Spreading his energy wings as wide as he could, Ichika soared upward through the circle of enemies, scattering untold numbers of energy bursts. A rolling thunder of explosions echoed below him as the energy lines collapsed. Diving back down and breaking through, he pressed on, finally catching up with the girl in red.

She was silent. Wordless. Forbidding.

“Where’s Houki?!” Ichika’s voice was filled with rage, but the girl answered calmly.

“You already know.”

“What?”

“So why ask me?”

“Well...” Ichika was stumped. His confusion was only broken as Charlotte and Laura called out to him.

“**Ichika!**” Their armor was peppered with bullet holes, suits scorched and torn, and their skin scratched and bruised. Charlotte, especially, had taken a heavy beating as she covered Laura’s assault.

“Are you two okay?!” The shock on Ichika’s face was met with anger on Laura’s.

“Damn it! You think you can win this fight yourself?! Quit fucking around!” That was the best way Laura could think of to show how concerned she was, but Ichika didn’t get the message.

“Listen, I’m going to save Houki! Then this whole mess will be over!”

“Dammit...!”

Laura wasn’t the only one set off by Ichika’s self-centered response. Charlotte wound up and slapped him straight across the face.

“Get a hold of yourself! You’re not the only one who wants to save Houki!”

That was enough to make Ichika come back to his senses.

“...Sorry.” Shocked by the slap, Ichika sheepishly apologized.

“It’s okay. As long as you understand now. Right, Laura?”

“Yeah.”

And then, there was the silent, unimpressed fourth participant in the conversation.

“You never do learn...” Sliding Akatsubaki’s twin blades from their sheathes, she rushed toward Ichika swifter than even Houki could. So fast, so fierce; her movements were uncannily precise.

“Keep going! I’ll hold her off to buy time!” Ichika called out.

“What?! That’s too dangerous, Ichika!”

He locked blades with the girl, only for her to swiftly slide hers around, making him stumble to the side. Charlotte and Laura didn’t realize, but Ichika did, that it was the Shinonono-style tsubazeri-gaeshi technique.

“H-How do you know how to do that?!” he blurted out.

“.....”

Having dealt with Ichika for now, the girl turned her attention to Laura and Charlotte.

“You may be good, but you’re not good enough to take two of us at once!” Laura spread her AIC stasis field, only for the girl to carve through it with her Kawaware at max power. “Ugh!”

Laura flinched back as the blade closed in, but Charlotte was there to cover her.

“Not so fast!” Two shields layered made for an impressive physical barrier, strong enough to stop even a blow from Akatsubaki. But only once.

The blow which was meant for Laura cleaved Charlotte’s shields in two. Behind them, Charlotte and Laura leveled their guns.

“Eat this!” Laura fired a burst strong enough to pierce even an IS’ shields. The close-ranged blast was enough to send the girl sprawling.

“I’m not letting you get away!” Charlotte’s bullets fell like rain. But just as they were about to finish her off, another wing of ten Akebachi appeared.

“Why don’t you busy yourself with these?” Charlotte and Laura were driven back by the coordinated assault as the girl turned back to Ichika.

“There’s too many! We can’t—”

“Not yet! This isn’t over yet!”

They fought on bravely but outnumbered, with more and more shots catching them as they maneuvered. But then, just as their shield energy ran out, an unexpected voice came over their comms, “GET DOWN!”

Before they even had time to wonder how going prone would help in an aerial battle, a wave of explosions enveloped the Akebachi.

“Graviton Cluster?!” They turned to see Iris in Seventh Princess and Djibril in Imperial Knight.

“Princess?! What are you doing here?!”

“After that match earlier, I’d feel guilty if I simply took advantage of someone else taking her out of my way.”

While Iris was perfectly calm, fresh, and self-composed, Djibril—who’d given everything they had to get Seventh Princess in position—panted for breath, “Anyway, though. I’m glad we made it in time.”

“I can’t begin to say how grateful I am.”

The Imperial Knight had been stealthily equipped with a supersonic shuttle package to ferry the heavy Seventh Princess into combat; though only Djibril knew that Maya had been a willing co-conspirator. Sometimes it paid to have connections.

“Leave these insects to me!” As Iris began to charge a second Graviton Cluster shot, more Akebachi poured forth from their hive. Djibril, Charlotte, and Laura moved to her defense.

“Go, Ichika!” He hesitated, worried about overextending again, but Laura’s voice spurred him on.

“Cover me! I’m going to get Houki back!” His eyes gleaming with determination, he chased after the girl.

“Welp,” Charlotte sighed as she watched him go. “Looks like we drew the short straw.”

“You know it.”

“It always seems to turn out that way.”

“Yeah. But that’s a soldier’s duty. To fight when they’re ordered to.”

Their comrades were fighting somewhere out there. But all they could do was believe in them. If Ichika was going to go on ahead, the best they could do for him was to make sure not one pursuer made it through.

“So let’s do this!” At Charlotte’s cry, the battle was rejoined.



“Ah, you’re here.” Off in the distance, the girl in red greeted Ichika.

“What are you really after?” he asked, not with the rage of before but with a controlled enmity.

“...My dream.”

“Your... dream?”

“No. *Our* dream. IS are machines built to fulfill their pilots’ dreams.”

Memories drifted, unbidden, to the surface of Ichika’s mind. The pale girl in his own dream. The more he recalled, the more she and the girl in red looked alike.

And—fulfilling dreams. Who was this girl, that she would believe so firmly?

“You already know the answer, don’t you? Somewhere deep down

inside.” She smiled faintly. “I am a dream. The power she dreamed of. The future she never stopped dreaming of.”

“That can’t be the answer Houki chose!”

The girl slipped the visor from her face. Behind it were eyes just like Houki’s when she was young. No, not ‘just like.’ She *was* the younger Houki.

“I am the first IS, Akatsuki. The power she first touched. The power to surpass all within this world. And—”

As if to finish her sentence, her twin blades slashed downward. Metal clashed on metal, sparks flew as Yukihiro Nigata rose to parry.

“The *alternative*. the replacement that can finally make you hers!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Ichika saw Akatsubaki’s IFF identifier change to Akatsuki. Not as a transformation. But as an awakening. The IS Akatsuki, finally reunited with its master, awoke from its long slumber.

“I exist to make you hers, to eliminate all who would interfere!”

Ichika had known, or at least could recite the fact, that IS had some sort of AI installed. But something able to take on a life of its own like this was more than just a machine. So just what *was* an IS, anyway? He didn’t have time to wonder now. Slash after slash rained down on him from Akatsuki as he was pressed back.

“Ugh...!” A swift parry left Ichika disarmed, Yukihiro Nigata spinning from his hand. And then, Akatsuki struck again.

“Become hers, Orimura Ichika.”

She was smiling. There was a smile on the girl’s face. A dispassionate smile. Neither cold nor warm as she gazed down at him.

“So...” Something inside him welled up in anger. “So what if that’s true?!”

Ichika raised his hand to block the incoming blow. He could hear his armor split. Feel his flesh rip apart. The point of her katana had stopped just in front of his eyes. No. His hand had stopped it.

“Aaaargh!” Sheer millimeters of respite, bought with his own left hand. Before he lost even that, he wrapped his right arm around the girl.

“Let me go!” Caught in his grasp, she began to panic, firing off bursts from the Ugachi cannon mounted on her shoulders.

“Let’s see who can hold out longer!”

“Wh—?!”

With his arm still around her, he soared higher and higher into the skies, his wings of light tearing at her as the Ugachi shots slammed into him.

“Stop! Stop! STOP! ...Stop it!”

“No, Houki!”

At the point where the heavens’ blue faded into black, the two IS

exploded.



Ugh...

Groggily, Houki opened her eyes. The blinding white sand of her memories, her soul... Blue sea and sky, white land. She wandered the shore aimlessly.

“I...”

Then she remembered. Remembered what she’d done.

I... It’s all because I wanted to be strong.. Akatsuki. The IS she’d been given. The ‘ruler’ of all IS. With the power to dominate any other. With it, she had challenged Chifuyu’s IS, Kurezakura. In the end, Chifuyu was left too beaten to even move, Kurezakura fatally damaged. And when Houki had realized what she had done, her memories had been sealed away. By Tabane.

“What have I done...”

Chifuyu disappeared from the history of IS. And it was her fault. She tried to run away from the responsibility. Tried to twist it. Tried to deny it. Her own weakness made her want to throw up. There was no way to pay for what she’d done. No way to redeem herself.

“I... I don’t...”

She didn’t deserve to be saved. Not by Ichika. Not by her friends. Not even by Akatsuki.

“I can’t...”

She wanted to disappear. To vanish. For the world to never have to see her puny, scheming self again. For *herself* to never have to see her puny, scheming self again.

“Don’t run away.” She heard a voice. Ichika’s voice. “Don’t run away, Houki.”

Ichika, beaten and battered, his IS Byakushiki pounded into scrap, settled to the ground, Akatsuki still in his arms.

“I’m here for you, Houki.” He forced a smile to his face even as blood gushed from his wounded hand. Not just his hand. His entire body was a mess of cuts and wounds. Yet still, he smiled. “There you go.”

Laying the unconscious Akatsuki on the sand, he closed Byakushiki.

“I-Ichika...” Houki’s eyes filled with tears at the sight of him.

“Why... Why would you go so far for me?”

She turned away, unable to watch him like that any longer.

“Isn’t it obvious?” He stepped forward. “Because you’re you, Houki. Not because you’re someone strong, or someone important. Because you’re *you*.”

Again, he stepped forward, and slowly held out his hand. As she

felt it brush her cheek, she finally turned back to him.

“Ichi... ka...”

“What’re you crying for?”

“Shut up...”



Houki could feel the tears well up. But if he could smile for her. If he could say it was because it was *her*. She... She could smile back. Even with tears in her eyes.

“Welcome back, Houki.”

“Ahh... I’m back, Ichika...”

Beside them, Akatsuki, its mission complete, began to fade away.

[Her dream is fulfilled...] Unknown to anyone, a smile came to Akatsuki’s face. Whether by its programming or its own will, none could know. *[Yet still, I... I’m happy. I can finally say I’m happy.]*

Having found itself, it faded into light.

And thus ended the Akatsubaki Incident.

Chapter IV: Respite in a Doomed World

“Owwwww!”

Two days since the battle. Ichika lay in his bed at IS Academy, his wounds bandaged tightly. Today, his nurse was Tatenashi.

“Jeez. Quit squirming. You’re a man, aren’t you?”

“Listen, I’m telling you, it hur— Nnngh!” It wasn’t just his left hand. His entire body was battered. They may as well have just dumped a bucket of antiseptic over his head instead of trying to swab it on.

“Sounds like it’s time for your nanomachine injection.” Tatenashi, in a nurse’s outfit, smiled while holding up a syringe. Normally, the appearance of an angel all in white to tenderly care for him would have a grin plastered over Ichika’s face, but all he could manage was a grimacing smile.



“Can’t we skip that? It really hurts.”

“Of course not. You’re just feeling it working!”

“Ugh...” Ignoring his complaints, Tatenashi made a quick three injections. He was so badly wounded that the normal one injection wouldn’t be enough.

“There we go. Good boy.” Nurse Tatenashi smiled as she finished the injection, her miniskirt riding up as she leaned forward.

“In thirty minutes or so, I’m going to see hell again...” Ichika shivered in anticipation of the pain that would soon wash over him, and Tatenashi sighed at his complete failure to notice.

“Speaking of which.” Sitting down on the bed, she glanced sideways at him. As his heart turned a backflip, Tatenashi took the chance to run a finger along his lips. “Ichika.”

“Y-Yes?”

The worried look on her face made him nervous as she spoke seriously, “Promise me. Promise me you’ll never do something like that again.”

“Well...”

He’d do it over and over again for his comrades. She knew that. And that’s why she insisted.

“What hurts you, hurts us. Do you want that to happen?”

“Ahh...” Ichika wasn’t the type to argue with gentle admonishment from his elders.

“Rest well, then. If you’re a good boy, I may just come back again.”

“Haha...”

Tatenashi disappeared with a smiling wink, leaving Ichika alone with his worries.

“.....”

He’d realized what IS really were now. But he still didn’t know what Tabane was really after or what her motivation was. How would he handle something like this? How would he handle *himself*? Would anything slow down the global IS arms race?

“Ugh, jeez.”

Worrying about it might not help anything, but that didn’t mean he could stop himself. *Can we really trust IS with our lives?* He remembered what Akatsubaki—no, Akatsuki, had said. That an IS acted on its pilot’s wishes. That it had kidnapped Houki in order to fulfill them. Could he really trust his life to something like that?

He looked down at the gauntlet on his right wrist. *Tell me, Byakushiki. Just what are you?*

The pale girl in his own subconscious. Was it just Byakushiki? Or the archetype of all IS? Ichika didn’t know. But he couldn’t help but

wonder.



Even two days on, Houki was still barricaded in the kendo dojo, meditating. She'd said the time had come where she needed to face her own weakness.

I've always been running away. From my own weakness. From my own immaturity. And now there was nowhere left to run. She wouldn't let herself run away anymore.

"You're still worried about that?" As she opened her eyes, she saw Ling leaning against the wall with her arms folded. It was a pose she took often, but today it looked different to Houki. "What's your problem? How long are you gonna keep staring at me like that?"

"Um... Well..." Straight to the gut. Ling was nothing if not direct.

"Anyway, though. You've seemed really gloomy lately."

"Wha—"

"Like something's really weighing on your shoulders. Yeah, that's it." Ling shifted her arms to behind her head nonchalantly as she continued. This was more than enough for Houki.

"How rude!"

"Not trying to be. I'm just curious, you know? Isn't your IS gone?"

"Ahh..."

Both Akatsuki and Akatsubaki had disappeared. Without them, she was just another average student. But... She didn't mind.

"I don't care. I can't run away from my strength or my weakness anymore." Houki was determined.

Seeing it in her face, Ling smiled. "Mhm. Well, good luck with that."

Waving, Ling left the dojo. As Houki watched her friend leave, she was grateful for the concern. *That's right. I'm not alone.* She now realized that that was true strength.



"Hmm." Iris frowned to herself as she scanned through a magazine outside Ichika's door. *Well, it sounded good when I read it the first time, but... I'm not so sure now...*

The headline of the article: 'Must-read tips for nurses! Spice up your checkups with these!' That said, this wasn't Iris's day to take care of Ichika, so she was in her IS Academy uniform rather than a nurse's uniform.

All right. Double-check one last time...

'The way to a guy's heart? Never let him know how hard you're trying'

‘Make it so *you* without making it about you’

‘He wants a nurse, not a doctor’

“Umm... Ummmmm.” Unable to work up the nerve to knock, she buried her nose back in the magazine for a triple-check. As she did, the door suddenly opened, catching her directly in the face. “Ow!”

“Hm? Alice?! Are you okay?!” Ichika was under strict orders for bed rest, but she’d caught him sneaking out.

“Ichika! What are you doing?!”

“Well, uhh...” Mumbling an excuse, he slouched back into his room. Before the door could close, Iris slipped in after him. “Jeez, c’mon!”

“What, you have a problem with me being here?”

“That isn’t the problem, Alice. Just, guys and girls shouldn’t sleep together after they turn fourteen. That’s just common sense.” Ichika was sure he’d heard that from Houki at some point. He patted Iris’s head as he led her back out into the hall.

“H-Hold on! Wait! What about your hand! Shouldn’t it be bandaged?!”

“Ah...” A guilty look washed over Ichika’s face. Seizing the opportunity, Iris grabbed him by the wrist.

“You... You’re completely fine! Ichika, did you learn some kind of healing magic?!”

“Well, umm...” As Ichika mumbled, trying to avoid eye contact, Iris continued to push him.

“What about here, then?!”

She pulled up Ichika’s shirt and examined his bare skin. His wounds, so deep just recently, had completely vanished. The healing nanomachines may have been effective, but they weren’t *that* effective. There wasn’t even a fading scar left on him. It was less as if he’d healed, almost more as if he’d been repaired.

“.....”

“Answer me, Ichika! Who... Who are you?!” The shock and anger on her face told him that he couldn’t make any more excuses.

“To be honest, Alice...”

“Mm?”

“I... I don’t think I’m a normal person.”

“What?!”

“Don’t tell anyone else what I’m about to say,” he answered reticently. “But this isn’t the first time I’ve healed so quickly from serious wounds.”

“Ah! Some sort of cybernetic fusion with your IS? But...”

Ichika shook his head, unwilling to go that far.

“I don’t know. But. Byakushiki isn’t normal. *I’m* not normal. There’s no way a normal human would be able to shrug things like

this off. So... I... I need to talk with Chifuyu. She has to know something about Byakushiki and me.” Again, he patted her head. “That’s a secret, okay?”

His smile alone was nearly enough to make steam come out of her ears.

“It’s safe... between the two of us...”

“Yeah.” He forced a smile to his face. Neither of them knew that a third had been eavesdropping.



“Mmm-hmm-hmhmm～♪ Mm-mm-mmm-hm-mmm～♪”

Somewhere in the deep, deep blue between sea and sky, Tabane happily hummed to herself.

“The time has come, Chichan.” Her finger poked at thin air, and around her, a 360-degree panoramic display opened tracing the status of every IS worldwide. “Time for the swan song!”

Her palm extended to the heavens, and the indicators turned as one from blue to purple.

“Activate IS Murasaki.”

A single phrase spread across the display, *[CODE VIOLET ACTIVATED.]*

The end had begun.





“Chifuyu. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

In the secret complex underneath IS Academy... Ichika stepped from the long, dark hallway leading to the operations room, to find Chifuyu reading through some papers.

“Ichika. What’s up?” She didn’t seem shocked to see him, even though he had strict orders for bed rest. In fact, she didn’t even turn her chair to face him. There was a coldness there that he couldn’t quite place his finger on.

“Aren’t you surprised, Chifuyu?”

“.....”

She’d acted as if the changes in his body were completely expected. The healing—rather, *repair* of his wounds. His unnaturally-heightened senses. And, more than anything, his uncanny synchronization with his IS. As incredible as it was, it was all being taken as a matter of course.

“You must know something,” he said.

““Something?””

Chifuyu pushed away the stack of papers and stared up at the blank, featureless ceiling.

“Probably everything you want to know.” She still didn’t turn to face him. He couldn’t read her expression. “Or maybe...”

“Hm?”

“Maybe *more* than you want to know.”

“.....?!” There was already a mountain of things he wanted to know. Ichika shivered as he realized that the truth went even deeper, that there would be no turning back.

“Are you ready to find out?” She finally turned and looked at him, her stare as sharp as a blade.

“I...” He’d never intended to push it that far. Curious or not, when it was put to him like that, he *wasn’t* ready. As if to remind him how childish his decision to bother her with it was, Chifuyu turned her eyes back to her papers. “Chifuyu, I...”

“Enough talk.” Ichika fell silent for a moment which seemed to last forever. And then, just as he was working up the courage to speak again, the door opened behind him.

“Mm? Aren’t you being a bit too strict with him, Chichan?” The voice was as playful as could be, but something about it terrified Ichika deep down inside.

“Tabane?! What are you doing here?!” Why was she in the secret complex beneath IS Academy? How did she even get there?

“You should know, Icky. There’s nowhere I *can’t* get to.” Tabane’s

words would have been playful if they weren't so twisted. Her abject, gleeful self-confidence set him on edge.

He didn't know what he wanted to do. Didn't know what he should do. But there was one thing he did know. Chifuyu and Tabane had spent so long by each other's side that the shadow which fell between them was far deeper and darker than he could comprehend.

"That's right, Icky! I'm going to tell you everything about your parents that Chichan never did!"

"My parents...?"

Why that, all of a sudden? That had nothing to do with what he was wondering.

"Yup, Icky! It's actually a really important part. Isn't it, Chichan?"

Chifuyu could barely hold back her rage as Tabane mockingly turned to her.

"Enough, Tabane!" she snarled.

"Ahaha! This so isn't like you, Chichan! You're supposed to be cool, controlled, even regal! Watching you melt down like this is hilarious." Tabane opened up a projection display and tossed it toward Ichika. Columns of numbers and impenetrable lines of text filled the screen.

And a single photo labeled 'Project Mosaica.'

"Look here, Icky." Tabane pointed to a part of the photo. "You know what that word translates to in Japanese? It translates to 'Orimura.' This is who you really are. The second viable fetus created by madmen seeking to surpass humanity."

"What the..." Unable to understand what Tabane meant, Ichika wavered. As he did, she joyfully launched into a monologue.

"Now, the Orimura Project produced a great deal of interesting data. Some of which was later put to use in Germany. But enough about minor details. Here, look at this picture."

A young girl with dark hair cradled an infant. Who was it? He didn't even have to ask. It was Chifuyu.

"Orimura Project Experimental Subject #1000. The first successful result. Our very own Chichan. Isn't it just so poetic? 'A thousand winters' for the thousandth subject."

".....?!" Struggling to understand, Ichika slowly turned his gaze to Chifuyu, who looked for all the world like she wanted to run and hide. "Wait, no... Chifuyu, why? How..."

He could see the pain on her face, making it clearer than any words could that what Tabane said was true. She'd never told him. She *couldn't* have told him. He never would have understood.

"But wait, there's more! The Orimura Project was going fine, until one day, it was suddenly canceled. And why do you think that might be? It's because there's absolutely no reason to waste your time

developing the ultimate human when *I'm* right here.”

The ultimate human. The once-in-a-generation genius. More perfect by nature than any man could imagine building. The Orimura Project was laid out to create something which could never exist naturally. But with nature having outdone it, it was meaningless.

“And that was the end of the Orimura Project. But there was just one hitch. Along with two successful specimens, there was one more off-the-books skunkworks project. And *that* was a problem. Whatever could be done about that? It couldn't simply be disposed of. Not for reasons of sentimentality or mercy, no, no. It was just an experiment. But because of how absurd its numbers were.”

“Its... numbers?”

“See, just having Chichan meant the success of the Orimura Project. She'd be the mother of a new mankind. But then, Icky. Then *you* came along. You, the chance to drive humanity's transformation faster than it ever could have proceeded. You, with that forbidden Y chromosome.” The words poured from Tabane's mouth like a song, like the chanting of an eldritch curse. “That's the problem the backers of the Orimura Project created for themselves. They wanted to create something which *surpassed humanity*. But they ended up with something that *wasn't human*.”

Tabane sighed theatrically.

“And that's when Chichan made her decision. She chose. Chose the one thing more important to her than the rest of the world, more important to her than her own future... You, her beloved little brother.”

And when she had, she threw away everything else. Absolutely everything. Everything she'd been promised. Even the little sister she didn't even know she had.

“So, Icky. The truth about your parents is, you have no parents! You're just a wreck drifting ashore from the sea of DNA. ...And that's why I want to say this.”

Smiling, she leaned in, with words barbed enough to tear out his heart.

“You *monster*.”

In that moment, Ichika's world ended, replaced by a void of despair.



“Ah!” Charlotte suddenly gasped in shock. The chain of the silver bracelet Ichika had bought her the summer before had snapped.

“What's wrong, Charlotte?” Laura asked curiously, stopping her stretches to look over at Charlotte.

“Oh, uhh, nothing.” Charlotte papered it over, but she couldn't

shake the feeling that it was an omen.

Why is my heart pounding like this? Where was Ichika, right now? What was he doing? She couldn't help but be worried for him. As she looked out the window, a cloud passed in front of the moon.

"I hope you're okay, Ichika..." she whispered.

It wasn't just a bad feeling, though. The worst had come to pass.



"Ngh..."

Ichika stood on the precipice of despair. Just a single push would send him tumbling to the waves below. That's why Madoka couldn't let it escape. Not this time. This one-in-a-thousand chance. With reflexes even quicker than an IS' autopilot, she plunged a dagger into his chest.

"It's over." Madoka pulled out the bloodstained knife and cast it aside, her expression twisted with madness. "I didn't even care about you at first. You didn't matter. But then I realized. Oh, yes, I realized. You were the only way to hurt Orimura Chifuyu."

Her face contorted into a parody of a grin.

"DAMN YOUUUUUU!" Chifuyu cried out, her rage red-hot.

"That's it. Perfect. You finally have to notice me now, Orimura Chifuyu." Madoka turned to face her—only for Chifuyu to dive by her toward Ichika. Toward her beloved little brother, as his lifeblood spilled out on the floor.

"You..." As she wrapped her arms around Ichika, Chifuyu glared at Madoka. "I'll kill you. I'LL KILL YOU ALL! No matter what."

"I was wondering when you'd work yourself up to that, Chichan." Tabane smiled. Turning her back, she strode away.

"Come, then. When you're ready to take on the world." She beckoned to Madoka. "We'll be waiting, Chichan."

Waving, she disappeared even more adroitly than usual.

"Waiting for you at the end of the world."

The words hung in the air as only the blood-spattered siblings were left...

Afterword

Hey all, it's Yumizuru again.

Well, this was a little quicker than last time. I'm still sorry for keeping you waiting, though.

(*This is where Yumizuru's mind begins to race!*)

"I-It wasn't like I was waiting for it! Hmph! I was just at the bookstore because, uh, because Fa**tsu comes out today! And then, well... Maybe I have to buy it, but... But I'm not gonna read it, okay?! It's for, uh, it's for my little sister! She reads it! Don't get the wrong idea!"

(*Delusions end here.*)

Thanks, readers!

I've been watching a bunch of anime lately. Got a subscription to D Anime Store, and wow, there's a bunch of good stuff on there! I've been... Well, I *started* watching Sekina Aoi's *Gamers!* and Hisago Amazake-no's *Knights and Magic* in real time. The characters are so cute! And the robots are awesome! Oh, and I'm rewatching *Armored Trooper VOTOMS* too.

...Yumizuru drinks, and the coffee is watery indeed.

On that note, I'm really happy that so many other authors have been getting their chances lately. I need to buckle down and work hard, too. No, really. I've gotta pick up the pace. Seriously.

I really wanna take a trip to some hot springs.

Hmm, what else. Oh, right. I've been on a diet lately. I don't look much different, but I've lost some weight. It was a friend's idea at first, but I'm beginning to appreciate the change I'm seeing in myself. I don't think anyone will believe me, but I'm back down to where I was before I started *IS!* Really!

And now that I think of it, I've started in on planning something new, but it's tough going. I put stuff together in a planning document and it looks great, but then the next day I come back to it and it just sounds lame. But I really would like to write it. After I polish off *IS*. Might be a little while before that happens, though.

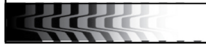
Anyway, I had a lot to say, but it's time to drop the curtain on this volume. Next time is *Infinite Stratos*'s conclusion, "In The Infinite Yonder"! It's all finally coming together. Just a little bit longer. See you there!

— Izuru Yumizuru

Subject Celebration of Vol. 12 Release	Date : My oldest is in second grade now!
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword	Time : Taking a bath at 8.
 CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI http://chocolateshop-float.com	

Apparently, the earliest bloomers start to develop around age 7. Um...



Subject Big Grats for the Vol. 12 Release	Date : The falling cherry blossoms are beautiful.
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☒ Afterword	Time : Wait, didn't I say that in Vol. 11 too—
 CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI http://chocolateshop-float.com	

“There is no class stratification in breasts.

Large or small, they each have their own value, they’re each deserving of your love.”

In an epochal shift, this volume has not one but two new flat-chested characters. Attempting to maintain the old ideals of “enough breasts for everyone” would surely spiral out of control, leading to the heat death of the universe. Thus, I have no choice but to embrace the danger of bringing forth a new balance from the ashes of the old, and build a future where flat chests can rise to their rightful place.

It’s perhaps because I embrace this challenge that I find this chiffon tube top bra so adorable.

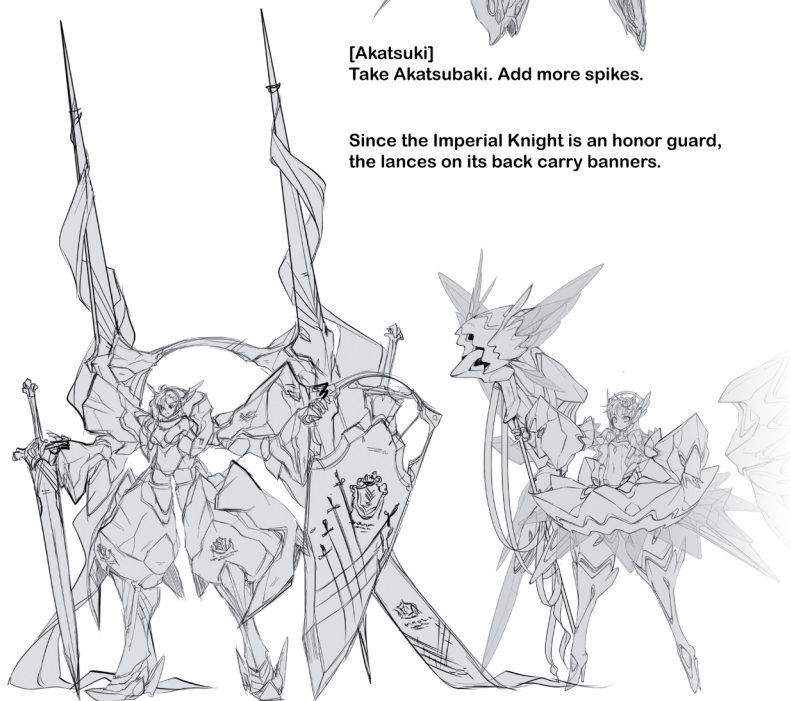
An early version of Iris’s design.
The design of her tiara later changed somewhat.





[Akatsuki]
Take Akatsubaki. Add more spikes.

Since the Imperial Knight is an honor guard,
the lances on its back carry banners.



Djibril's IS
[Imperial Knight]

Iris's IS
[Seventh Princess]











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Infinite Stratos: Volume 12

by Izuru Yumizuru

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